
VIDEOGAME CULTURE
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The dazzling, hypnotic spirit of Rez evolves with Kinect control
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When a child first attempts to draw something beyond random, energetic scribbles, it errs towards the familiar. A person, perhaps, or a house. It is human nature to replicate what we know – hence what is commonly referenced as the world's first videogame, 1958's oscilloscope-driven *Tennis For Two*, being modelled on, well, tennis. It takes some kind of experience with the familiar before we're ready to explore the fantastical.

Tetsuya Mizuguchi's career in videogames to date serves as a good analogy. Starting out at Sega, he worked within the company's AM5 coin-op division to create *Sega Rally Championship*, a game whose sharply rendered cars, based on real-life legends such as the Lancia Delta and underpinned by a sensational, powerslide-happy physics model, thrilled all who wrestled with them. A similarly structured sequel followed three years later. And then came his next game, *Space Channel 5*, a rhythm-action confection requiring the player to assume the role of a lithe-limbed news reporter strutting along to one of gaming's most deliriously exuberant soundtracks as she rescues hostages from candy-coloured aliens in high-intensity dance-offs.

The shift in genres was extreme, but Mizuguchi's synaesthesia-inspired *Rez*, in 2001, was an even more experimental work which established his reputation among gamers as a pioneer in a medium that no longer appeared to encourage the realisation of leftfield concepts. Or perhaps the leftfield concepts were still coming through, and Mizuguchi's real talent was persuading conservatively minded publishing types to bankroll their production.

Whatever the case, his desire to explore the possibilities that exist within audiovisual interaction remains undimmed, and this issue's cover star, *Child Of Eden*, to be published by Ubisoft, is his boldest experiment to date.

The audacious fidelity evident in *Gran Turismo 5*'s vehicle models is to be admired, and the same goes for *Medal Of Honor*'s efforts to deliver an authentic taste of modern warfare. When it comes to pure videogaming escapism, though, *Child Of Eden* stands on its own. Our in-depth look at the game begins on p56.



Autodesk Games Insight

The Latest Scoop from Autodesk Media & Entertainment



***EVE Online*. Image courtesy of CCP Games.**

Welcome to this issue of Autodesk Games Insight, covering what's new with Autodesk in the games industry. I am Magnus Wennerholm, the former CEO of Illuminate Labs—now a proud consultant to the Autodesk Games team after Autodesk's acquisition of Illuminate Labs in July 2010. In this issue, I will talk about the Autodesk® Beast™ 2011 lighting middleware and the Autodesk® Maya® Entertainment Creation Suite Premium 2011, which includes the lighting plug-in Turtle 5.1 for Autodesk® Maya® 2011 software.

Autodesk Games

One of the key benefits of Illuminate Labs being a part of Autodesk is the opportunity to make a bigger impact on the games industry. Autodesk technology helps game companies build modern pipelines with a wide variety of options to better suit their needs. Autodesk's goal is to help game developers spend less time building workflows or solving redundant problems, and more time realizing their vision. This goal spans both our content creation and middleware offerings. Beast and Turtle lighting middleware technologies complement the broad set of tools from Autodesk, providing a more comprehensive solution.

A recent Pfeiffer Consulting study found that production teams can increase their ROI by up to US$20,000 per workstation, per year* when upgrading to Maya 2011, and by US$16,000 per workstation, per year* when upgrading to Autodesk® 3ds Max® 2011 software, as compared to specific earlier versions. The enhanced productivity tools in these latest releases help game teams shorten iteration time, and maximize creative time. With advanced middleware technology, Autodesk continues its focus on making game development more efficient for the creative visionaries who use our products, helping save valuable programmer time. Why would a team re-create technology or use outdated, less-efficient tools when they could focus creative efforts on what makes their game fun and unique?

Autodesk Beast 2011

Developers can aesthetically enhance their game with Autodesk Beast middleware's global illumination (GI) lighting solution. Light bounces, color bleeding, soft shadows, and other GI effects become possible with Beast. Teams can avoid complicated and time-consuming lighting setups and take advantage of a pre-computed GI solution, minimizing runtime cost. Three key components work in concert to help decrease iteration time and increase aesthetic quality: Liquidlight®, eRnsT, and DistriBeast technologies. Liquidlight is a baking technology for advanced GI and dynamic relighting of characters. Artists can explore and control their lighting setups with the eRnsT interactive editor and enjoy the power of the DistriBeast distribution engine when running renders on multiple machines.

Autodesk Maya Entertainment Creation Suite Premium 2011

With specialized toolsets designed to help optimize end-to-end production workflows, the Maya Entertainment Creation Suite Premium supports game developers' creative potential and helps to boost productivity with the power of Autodesk Maya, Autodesk® Softimage®, Autodesk® Mudbox™, and Autodesk® MotionBuilder® software—and now Turtle. With sophisticated GI rendering and baking, Turtle is designed for higher-quality, next-generation game development. I am excited to see what all of the talented developers will do with the Suite's advanced workflow, combined with the 3D modeling, digital sculpting, texture painting, and animation tools.

The AREA Game Developer Zone

We love to hear from you and see your work. Over a quarter-million artists and developers have joined the AREA community site. With the Game Developer Zone, we have created a community within the AREA just for games. It is the new home of Beast and Turtle user forums. Join us online for dialogue, downloads, learning, and fun at **area.autodesk.com/forum/game-developer-zone**.

We Value Your Feedback

The team in Gothenburg, Sweden, is excited to join the talented Autodesk engineers and developers. If you have any questions or would like to evaluate our middleware technology, we'd love to hear from you. Please contact us at **middleware@autodesk.com** or visit **autodesk.com**.



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** Pfeiffer Consulting, an independent technology research institute and benchmarking firm, quantified specific performance, productivity, and efficiency gains of Autodesk Maya 2011 and Autodesk 3ds Max 2011 software, as compared to specific earlier versions. The four research reports consist of two comprehensive ROI studies and two user-workflow productivity studies. Learn more at autodesk.com/modernpipeline.*



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"Just shut up and take it."



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Blizzard's challenge in South Korea involves building *StarCraft II*'s profile so that tournament audiences are drawn to it in the same manner as they are the original game, which still attracts sizeable crowds




PRO-GAMING

The battle for StarCraft II

Blizzard sends in the siege tanks as it attempts to protect its IP in the face of a backlash by the Korean pro-gaming scene

It wasn't meant to be like this. Not at all. Blizzard's long-anticipated launch of *StarCraft II* was meant to be a dream – a triumphant return to the RTS genre that made the company's name in 1997, when the first *StarCraft* revolutionised realtime strategy gaming. The centrepiece of the game's launch? South Korea, the epicentre of world competitive gaming, where the low-specs original spread like a virus, hopping from the gamer fringe to become a mainstream sport within five years. Of the ten-million-plus copies of the original game sold worldwide, half were in South Korea. Two television channels sprang up to broadcast matches between the 12 Proleague teams, and fans flocked to see elite players face off against their rivals. The best players pulled in big money, earning up to £200,000 a year.



Photograph: **Gom TV**

Kim Won-Ki, who plays as FruitDealer, swept away the competition with his Zerg to beat HopeTorture and take the big prize at October's *StarCraft II* Open final in Seoul

With so many players and fans still playing the original, with dedicated TV channels, with an entire sport evolving from a single game, what could possibly go wrong?

It's no wonder that Blizzard looked to South Korea as the land of opportunity for the sequel. With so many players and fans still playing the original, with dedicated television channels running constant promotion, with an entire sport evolving from a single game, what could possibly go wrong?



Lee Jae-Dong, who plays as Jaedong, is ranked second in the world in KeSPA's *StarCraft* rankings, but is switching to its sequel



Plenty, as it turns out.

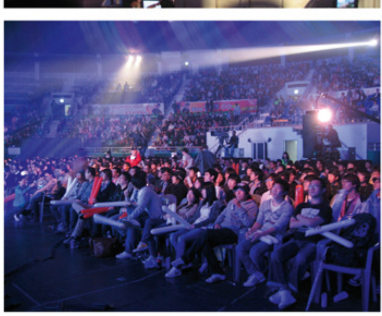
When Blizzard made the original *StarCraft* way back in 1998, in the early bloom of gaming as a massive entertainment industry, the company had no way of predicting the success of the game in Korea. The blossoming of the e-Sports industry there, spearheaded by *StarCraft*, took place in an ad-hoc, unregulated manner, and not a single dollar was paid to Blizzard by any of the Korean entities which grew up around the *StarCraft* phenomenon. This time around, things have changed. Vivendi took part control of Blizzard in 2008 through its majority-owned company Activision, and a new, more commerce-focused slant became apparent despite Blizzard's relative independence. Now there would be no chance that an entire sport would spring up unauthorised. This time, Blizzard was going to take control of its own intellectual property and control what was done with it. Stung by the experience of battling *World Of Warcraft* bots, task automators and gold farmers, the company took a hardline stance against KeSPA – the Korean e-Sports Players Association – and the two TV channels, MBC Game and OnGameNet. In an open letter on May 27 – two months before the full release – Blizzard president **Mike Morhaime** laid it out in the open: "In 2007, we were shocked and disappointed to learn that KeSPA had illegally sold the broadcasting rights for *StarCraft* tournaments without our consent. With this clear violation of our intellectual property rights, we were forced to become more actively involved in the

situation and make our voice be heard." Strong words indeed. Morhaime wrote that his company had tried hard to negotiate with KeSPA – which has the backing of the Korean government, the teams, and the TV channels – but had got nowhere, effectively forcing Blizzard to ditch KeSPA and give exclusive broadcast rights to *SCII* matches to a minnow of an operation, Gom TV. The announcement sent shockwaves through the Korean e-Sports establishment, and rippled out into the English-speaking world. To fend off the perception of a money-grab, Morhaime tackled the issue head on: "Unlike the negative rumours you might have heard, Blizzard's intention towards e-Sports is not to 'dominate' it and create excessive profits from it. From the beginning of the negotiations up to now, the basic framework we have thought of is one where e-Sports can continue to grow, while we can protect our intellectual property rights."



Earlier this year, Blizzard president Mike Morhaime left no doubt that the company would be taking a hardline approach in South Korea





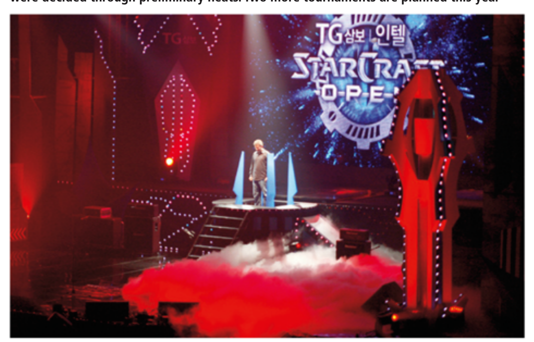
Why is Blizzard getting so hardline about broadcasting rights? After all, the 12 pro-gaming teams are sponsored by major Korean companies who regard the sport simply as a way to get young people interested in their brands. There's no real money in broadcasting *StarCraft* – the large audience is nearly all teenage or in its early 20s, a group that in Korea does not have much disposal income, and attending a *StarCraft* stadium match costs nothing. As **Jae-Gyoon Yi**, one of the founders of professional *StarCraft* and the coach of the Woongjin Stars team, told us, when a company sponsors a pro-gaming team, it's simply another marketing avenue for product exposure. "In ten years, fans might choose their products instead of the competitors'. They will remember the name," he says. A team costs up to £14m per year to run – small beer for a long-term branding operation. But the massive corporations will only stay loyal to their teams if fans keep coming to matches and watching them on TV. This battle over intellectual rights may in fact damage the very industry which Blizzard wants to run. As Korean *StarCraft* commentator **Milkis** says, this offline battle is all about control. "Blizzard wanted a lot of control – ownership of pretty much everything – which KeSPA refused to give," he says. "The actual negotiations had little to do with money, but more about how much control each party has." Control seems to be increasingly important to Blizzard, as evidenced by its refusal to include the LAN play functionality which made the first game such a favourite. To play *StarCraft II* competitively at all, you have to go through the shinier but more restrictive Battle.net, without chatrooms and restricted to playing within the single region in which you purchased the game. Dig a little bit into Battle.net's terms of use and you'll find that it is forbidden to "use the Service for any 'e-Sports' or group competition sponsored, promoted or facilitated by any commercial or non-profit entity without Blizzard's prior written consent". In short, the unauthorised Korean scene is hereby put on notice: stop using Blizzard's intellectual property, or be prepared to cough up for the privilege.

Blizzard's hardball approach has left Koreans feeling sore. A KeSPA spokesman told us that he felt the Korean industry had effectively created the *StarCraft* phenomenon. In part, that's true – the

Terran Hellions take a pounding from Protoss Stalkers, Immortals, Zealots and a Void Ray in *StarCraft II*, whose sales success to date has been mostly down to western players



Entry to the ***StarCraft II*** **Open tournament was, as you'd expect, open to anyone, but only Koreans were left by the final 16. The 64 players who took part in the televised matches were decided through preliminary heats. Two more tournaments are planned this year**



region's fascination with all things Zerg, Terran and Protoss did wonders for Blizzard's bottom line when it was a smaller company than it is today, and countless thousands more copies were sold once the big-name stars emerged on television. "Our position is that we created the competitions. Korea is the home of *StarCraft* – it's very big here. There are still lots of people playing an old game, but now I think Blizzard wants it to be here without KeSPA," says the spokesman. "Blizzard wants Battle.net to be used in competitions, not LAN. And they want more money."

Cutting out the old players seemed like a smart move for Blizzard as it prepared to launch a game it felt certain would update and refine its 1998 offering, guaranteeing years more pro-gaming. As critics began lining up to praise the slick graphics, refined gameplay and new tactics, surely no one would mind if it omitted LAN play – forcing all game traffic through Battle.net – and introduced regional licences for the game? Surely the devoted Korean fans wouldn't mind if a new, more amenable player picked up the rights to broadcast competitions on television?

> **"There are still lots of people playing an old game, but now I think Blizzard wants it to be here without KeSPA. It wants Battle.net used in competitions. And it wants more money"**

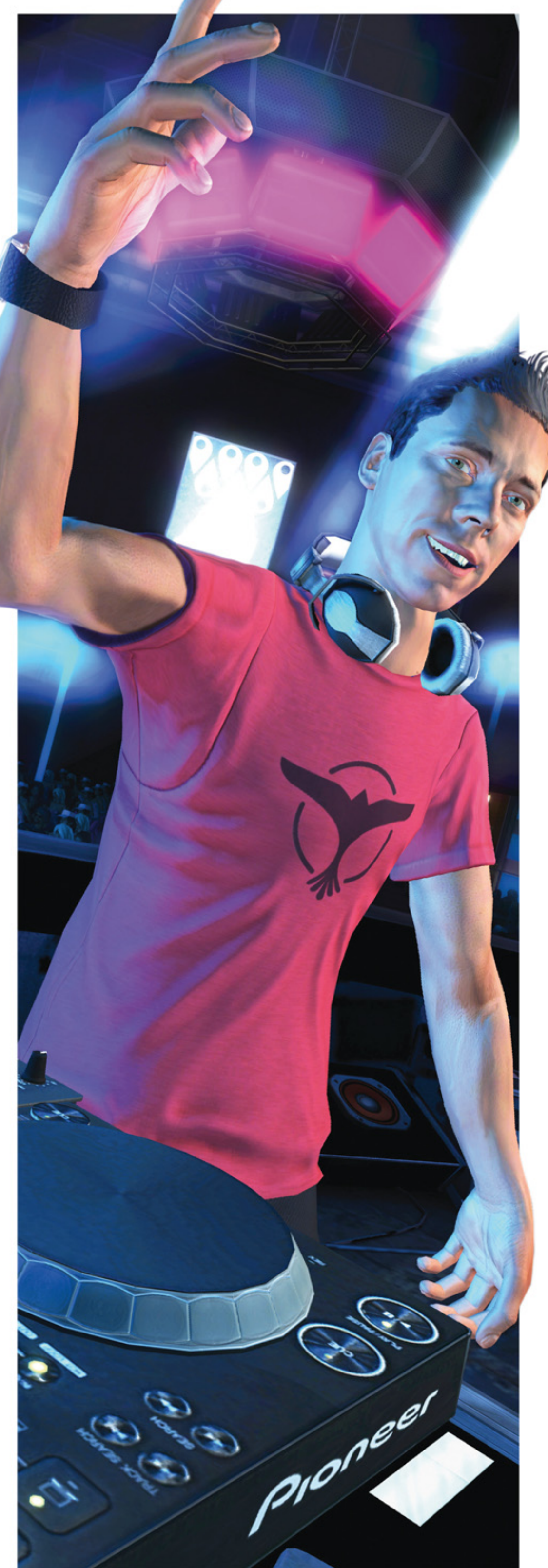
It seems, however, that Blizzard may have guessed wrong. In Korea, *StarCraft II* hasn't bombed – but it hasn't done as well as its maker was expecting. There's been a 12-year gap between game instalments, and many players have either outgrown games or moved on to more novel pastures. *StarCraft II* is an updated *StarCraft*, not an entirely new game. Eager to ensure Koreans ditched their beloved original *StarCraft* for the revamped version, Blizzard offered the game to Korean *WOW* gamers for free. Even so, the numbers playing in PC baangs (net cafes) have been lower than expected, with only two to three per cent of Korean gamers playing *SCII* in the month after it was released. It's a tiny number given that Korea is perceived as *StarCraft*'s home market, that the game was released in time for the school holidays, and that it launched with a $30m ad campaign. In fact, *StarCraft II*'s three-million-plus sales have been mainly in the west.

But after months of tense negotiations, the future may be shifting Blizzard's way once more. In recent weeks, one of the two main *StarCraft: Brood War* league organisers, MBC, has reluctantly made overtures to Gom TV for the rights to broadcast. It means that KeSPA – which is supposed to represent the entire e-Sports industry – is losing its grip. Since Gom TV owns the Korean rights to broadcast *StarCraft II* and the original game, Blizzard effectively has KeSPA, and Gom's rival TV channels, over a barrel. Gom TV gave the two established *StarCraft* leagues until the end of August to finish their now-illegal matches. Since then, however, negotiations have been going badly. "It's hard to look at the one-sided and coercive demands as negotiations," a KeSPA source said in late September. The pro team KT, which was involved in the negotiations, went further. "We once again confirmed that [Gom owner] Gretech does not have any desire to negotiate as they deny the existence of pro-game teams and the Proleague," said its spokesman.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the pitched battle over broadcast rights, Korean pro-gamers are beginning to make the switch to *StarCraft II*. **Jaedong**, widely considered the best Zerg player in the original *StarCraft* at present, now says he will move over to *StarCraft II*. "I will definitely switch as I feel *StarCraft II* has a higher status than *StarCraft: Brood War*," he told a Chinese game blog. "We will see more international tournaments in *SCII* compared to *StarCraft: Brood War* and this will make the change natural for me. I want to build my reputation abroad and reach out to the international audience."

For pro-gamers, the case for switching between two similar games was given a boost by April's match-fixing scandal, which engulfed some of the original *StarCraft*'s most highly paid players, including the legendary Zerg player sAviOr. Many players were forced to quietly resign or stay out of the limelight, while disgusted fans began abandoning the game, speeding up an existing trend away from *StarCraft* towards newer, Korean-made titles. As Milkis notes, Korean e-Sports has been shrinking recently: "People are growing up, getting into different kinds of games, and events like this [the Blizzard crackdown] and match fixing are drawing people away from the game."

For now, Blizzard is pinning its hopes on *StarCraft II* pro-gaming taking off worldwide, rather than remaining in the Korean ghetto of ultra-high actions-per-minute and ten-hour-day practice sessions. To that end, Gom TV put on an open tournament in Seoul in early October, with prize money totalling £315,000. Despite being open to players from around the world, the tournament was largely Korean, and the Korean Zerg player FruitDealer sent in the Ultralisks to ensure ultimate victory. He was one of the earliest pro-gamers to make the switch to *StarCraft II*, after he was forced to leave the original *StarCraft* scene and his team, eSTRO, to deal with a family emergency. Returning, he picked up the new game and proved himself the current master, pocketing £53,000. With his historic win, FruitDealer has staked a firm claim that Korean *StarCraft* gamers are still the world's best. It's a promising sign for Blizzard and Gom TV, but the future is not certain. We won't know for some time if Blizzard's tough tactics have damaged the *StarCraft* phenomenon in Korea beyond repair, or if it all merely boils down to transitional road bumps.



INTERVIEW

Music: response

Has DJ Hero found its groove? We call out FreeStyleGames for answers

Had *DJ Hero* been the flop the internet pretended it was, it all could have been different. Not abandoned, maybe, but certainly less autonomous. Without the support of a knowing and trusting audience, you have to wonder when someone would have noted, "New audience required. Contact Miley Cyrus." Thank God, then, that the game *was* a success, and that its sequel does nothing but build on it. With the umbilical cord to *Guitar Hero* cut, confirms creative director **Jamie Jackson**, it's time for FreeStyleGames to live up to its name.

Presumably you wouldn't be making a second *DJ Hero* if the first one hadn't succeeded?
I don't think so, no. Last year was interesting for games as a whole, as obviously global markets just died on their arse. A lot of people looked to games because it was repeat entertainment: 40 quid on a night out is done and dusted; 40 quid on a game can keep you and the kids happy for months. We were a little bit lucky in that things really tailed off towards the end of last year, and people got really hit with their money and got really selective. So most spent it on *Modern Warfare 2*, which was great for Activision, great for us.

A couple of things made it look on the outside like *DJ* wasn't successful. The price was really high and people picked on that, which is a fair point. And, to coin a phrase I absolutely despise, it was a slow burner. Most games come out and do 90 per cent of their sales in the first week and drop off; the *DJ* curve was different. We're well over one-and-a-half million units – and if someone had said to me when I started in games, "You'll do a game that sells one-and-a-half million and isn't considered a success," I'd have said, "Are you mental?"

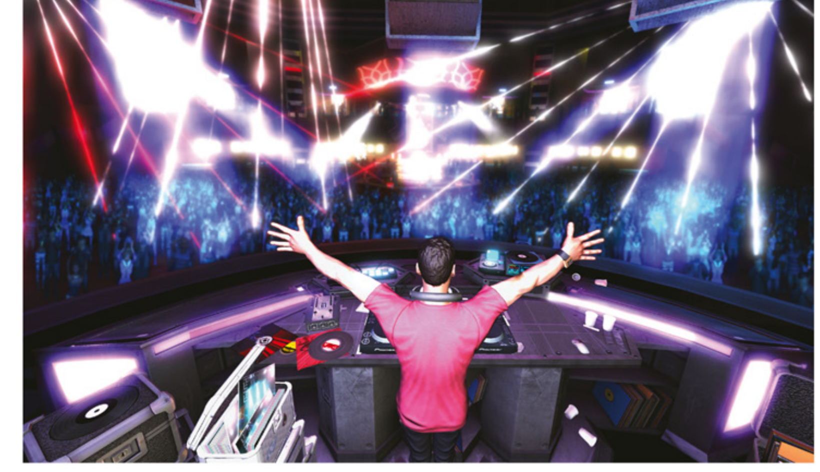
> **"A couple of things made it look like DJ Hero wasn't successful. The price was really high and people picked on that, which is a fair point. And it was a slow burner"**

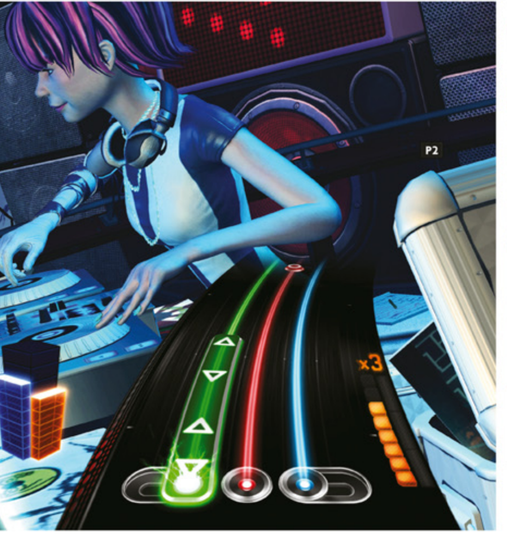
Isn't it just the rubbernecking culture of the internet, which encourages negativity?
Yeah, I do believe that. And it's not just games, it's any form of news or story. There's a small group of people – always the same people – that like to pick fault with everything. We got so much shit off *everybody* when *DJ Hero* was announced – the worst-kept secret of 2009. The amount of posts I saw of "Oh, it'll be *Accordion Hero* next" was ridiculous. And for the guys here who'd put their hearts and souls into it, that was quite depressing.

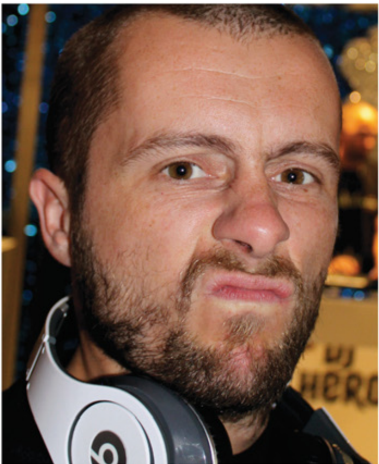
Might the evolution of *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* influence *DJ Hero*?
Yes and no. In terms of the audience, one, lots of girls bought *DJ Hero*, which we didn't expect; two, the vast majority of the people who bought it did so for the DJ bit, not as a rhythm-action game. If you look at titles like *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero*, what's great for us is that it's less a gravitation than a learning experience. Look at how they critically rated at certain points in their history. What did they get flack for? What did the consumers think, importantly?

Multiplayer's a big thing for us this year. It's not naturally something that fits. We can't just go "Here's a band!" and make it work. It's been good to look at the multiplayer that, say, *Guitar Hero* did, where they did weapons. That didn't work for them. We had ideas about weapons, about being able to break the opponent's needle, or break the









Jamie Jackson is creative director at UK studio Freestyle Games, which was bought by Activision in 2008. The company's work on *DJ Hero 2* is its most wide-ranging to date, with 83 exclusive mixes featuring artists such as Lady Gaga, Metallica and Rhianna

crossfader so it went left instead of right and vice versa. That's your eureka moment as a designer – but when you play it…

How much authority do you give the fans when it comes to features?
You still have a balance. You don't want to lose your audience. One thing I've always said is that if we make a DJ sim, we get it wrong. That's not what people want. They might think they want that, but *DJ: Decks & FX* came out on PS2 in 2004, and that allowed what people are asking for now. It didn't do well because the consumer didn't want that. It's hard to make a mix, and that's the trick: hear what people are saying they want and, without sounding too arrogant, give them what they *really* want.

***DJ Hero* seems to have avoided the animosity from real musicians that occasionally blighted *Guitar Hero*. Have you capitalised on that with the sequel?**
DJs understand technology. Straight away they got what we were doing. And they're gamers. DJ Shadow's a mad gamer. And Qbert as well – he's into *Warcraft* big time. They get it, and they make the connection quicker. It sits in their mindset much better, and they can see that they're not just signing a bit of paper to use music or a licence. "Do you want to make a mix?" "Of *course* I want to make the mix." This time round, DJs have come to us in some cases so it's been easier in that sense. We've had more time, so that's more time to get them in the motion-capture studio. If you've seen a deadmau5 performance then you know it's not just about the music, so that's been brilliant. Tiesto's the same. Those are great problems to have.

***Rock Band*'s very deliberately fused with the music industry – will *DJ Hero* do the same?**
There's stuff I can't talk about… But I think we can do it. And if you see the Tiesto mixes in *DJ*, the way he's approached them is that they're almost originals rather than mashups. They're original mixes where he's Tiesto-fied them. So you could do an extension along those lines. We've been able to go out and see DJs with production talent and show them how to use their tracks in the game, and there's nothing to say we can't do that with other artists as well. Whether it makes as much obvious sense as a band doing a track and putting it in *Guitar Hero*… maybe not. But there are ways to make it work.

Newswire



Enter the Jungle

Consumer electronics giant Panasonic is preparing to re-enter the videogame market with its first piece of hardware since its line of 3DO consoles in the mid-'90s. Its new handheld console, named Jungle, is a clamshell device with a QWERTY keyboard that makes a big deal about its connectivity. Bigpoint's *Battlestar Galactica* MMOG was the platform's big game at its unveiling, while the 'badass' show Online Underground was also trailed. Other features: two D-pads, shoulder buttons, touchpad, micro USB port, micro HDMI port, and a 'high-resolution' display. It may not be the prettiest device in the playground, but at least its MMOG leanings give it a unique spin. Expect a full report soon.

OUT THERE



A BOATLOAD OF HUH?

If you thought Microsoft's peripheral-free Kinect would deter manufacturers from producing pointless accessories, you thought wrong. Italian company Atomic Accessories has revealed the Game Boat, designed for use with *Kinect Adventures*. Described by the official press release as "revolutionary", it's a life-size replica of the "awesome dinghy" featured in Microsoft's energetic launch title. Listed as one of Game Boat's features, fortunately, is "Reisstant [sic]: you can sit on it". Squeezing in two adult players simultaneously may prove to be a challenge, but at least a pump is provided in the box.

tinyurl.com/kinectboat



INTERVIEW

Serving up a treat

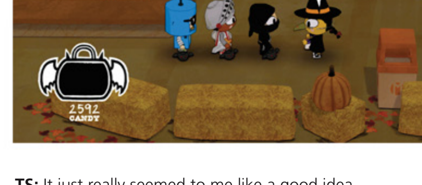
Halloween's here, and the man behind Monkey Island is offering some turn-based bumps in the night

Compared to a summer camp for psychic children, a world made from rock album cover art, or the Aztec land of the dead, American suburbia might seem a rather dull setting for a game – except, perhaps, on Halloween. We talk to **Tim Schafer**, creative director of *Costume Quest*, and **Tasha Harris**, the game's project lead, about the inspirations behind Double Fine's miniature RPG, and the experience of making a holiday-themed game.

Why do you think it's so rare for a roleplaying game to offer a short playing time?
Tasha Harris: I'm not sure. I grew up with RPGs and they were always these huge, epic, 40-hour games. Getting older, I still like them but I don't have as much time. As an adult gamer I kind of appreciate shorter games.
Tim Schafer: You can take out the grinding aspect of those games and get rid of a lot of the hours of gameplay. And that's the good thing about this game – there's no grinding, it's all just the content of the quests. It's more condensed, but you still level up and get that feeling of progression and customisation that you get in good RPGs.
TH: A lot of RPGs force you to go away and level up your character or do repeatable quests. This shorter length allowed us to remove that and make all the quests different, and more focused.

What else has the shorter game length allowed you to do?
TS: Well, we've made a seasonal game, which is an unusual thing to do. So, rather than being a big movie, it's a more like a special edition of a TV show which would come out on Halloween.

Where did the idea for *Costume Quest* come from?
TS: It started years ago, when Tasha was just a wee girl…
TH: [Laughs] I came up with the idea when I was a kid. I was just drawing, and I drew these kids trick or treating and I always thought it could be a cool game. It didn't happen until I came to Double Fine and pitched the idea to Tim quite casually, over lunch or something. When he decided to do the 'amnesia fortnight' project, where we divided the company into four teams of ten or 15 people which each had to put together a game demo in two weeks, Tim asked if I wanted to do *Costume Quest* as one of those.



TS: It just really seemed to me like a good idea. I thought, 'Why hasn't that been done before?' It seems like a natural fit.

Do you see yourselves going through the amnesia fortnight process again?
TS: Yes, definitely, it's something we'd like to do again. The original impetus for it was that we wanted to take a creative break from *Brütal Legend*. We'd been working on that for a year and a half and had a year and half to go, at least, and we wanted to give the team a break from that world. We had such a great time doing it that I would like to do it every year. There's something cool about just, you know, *doing* something as opposed to talking about it or developing it slowly





Due to the game's Halloween theme, *Costume Quest* is the first production Double Fine has had to complete to a strict deadline, but Tim Schafer and Tasha Harris believe the schedule proved useful since it constrained and defined the scope of the game

Newswire



The critical list

Edge contributors along with writers from farther afield have collaborated on a videogame-focused book that's now on sale for the Christmas gift season. Entitled 1001 Video Games You Must Play Before You Die, it's edited by Edge's editor-in-chief, Tony Mott, and consists of 960 pages containing critical analyses of games dating from 1974 to 2010. Featuring screenshots throughout and including entries on mainstream hits like the *Halo* series alongside more leftfield indie titles such as *Spelunky*, the book is published in the UK by Cassell Illustrated at an RRP of £20, and in the US by Universe at an RRP of $36.95.



over time. We just said, "Here's a crazy idea for a mechanic – hey, let's try it!" I mean, think about something crazy like *Katamari* – you're a giant ball rolling around picking up stuff. You can talk about whether or not that's fun for a long time, or you can just try it. So all our games, we just mocked them up. The advantage of that was that when we were done we had demos to bring to publishers.

So will Double Fine be concentrating on shorter, downloadable games in future?
TS: Yeah, I'd like to do them a lot more. But if we get the idea for a big game, or the opportunity comes up for a game that just screams "millions of dollars"… [Laughs] I mean, each idea tells you what it needs to be. With *Costume Quest* we were like, "OK, this needs to come out on Halloween, so it can't take four years to make."

How did you find working to such an inflexible deadline?
TS: It was the first time we had to be out, no matter what. A lot of the time we'll say, "Oh, if we had an extra month we could do this or add this to the game…" But this time even if our publisher had said, "Oh yeah, take as much time as you want," we couldn't move Halloween. So there was no ability to move past that date. It was great. It told us, "No, you can't add that thing you want to add," which really kept us on schedule.

We just said, 'Here's a crazy idea for a mechanic – hey, let's try it!' You can talk about whether or something is fun for a long time, or you can just try it"



Costume Quest uses its novel status as a seasonal game to its advantage – and is packed with Halloween locations and humour. Schafer argues this is something made possible due to the short schedules of downloadable titles. To read more of his thoughts on the opportunities afforded by the DLC market, turn to the feature on p78

Do you think long development schedules can be counter-productive?
TS: Guys like Blizzard and Valve really seem to benefit from taking as much time as they want. It's great that *Costume Quest* had to come out because it helped us scope the idea down, which I think made it a better game. And that allows us to move on to the next game.

Double Fine's games seem to put a lot of emphasis on unusual settings – why do you think that is?
TS: The setting is the primary inspiration for making a game – going all the way back to *Monkey Island*, being on that Pirates Of The Carribbean ride in Disneyland and thinking, 'This is a world which could come to life.' It was the same for the land of the dead in Mexican folklore or, well, Halloween. I think, 'Here's a place that I'd like to explore, and if I want to explore it maybe other people do as well.'
TH: *Costume Quest*'s setting was inspired by my favourite game of all time, which was *EarthBound*, and the *Pokémon* series, which also takes place in the modern day. I think it's a great setting for RPGs to take place in. There's something about it that I really like. It's relatable.

Are there any settings you haven't tried but would like to?
TS: I don't know. The one thing I didn't get to make was… at the end of LucasArts I was working on a space game. And that was really hard to do because out in space, it's really crowded! It feels like everywhere you go you're stepping on Star Wars' or some other space franchise's toes.

Are there any rules when it comes to game writing that you think should be followed?
TS: It's hard to say because it's the only writing I've ever known, the only writing I've ever done. I always thought I'd be a short story writer but I've never really ever… I think I've finished one short story my whole life [laughs]. I've only written for games so I'm so used to thinking, 'Right, the player's done this, but they haven't done this yet,' or 'They know about this, but what if they haven't been to see this guy?' It's the only way I really know how to construct dialogue.

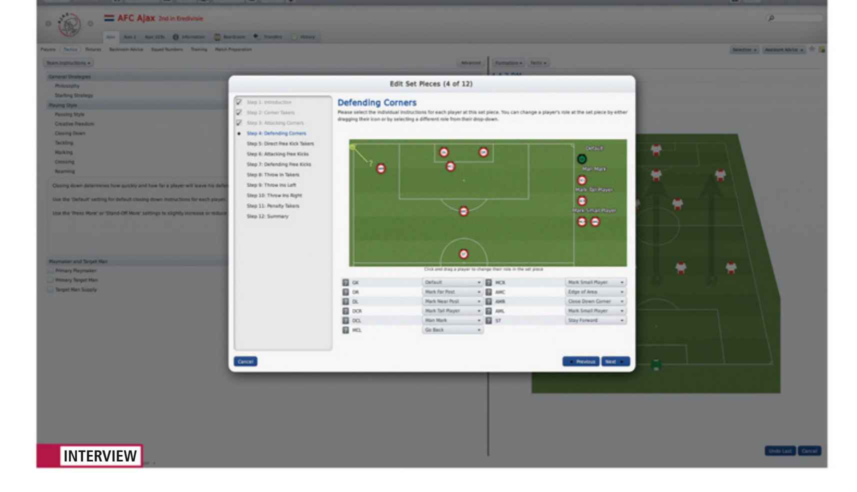


"Videogames are the comic books of our time. It's a medium that gains no respect among the intelligentsia. They say, 'Oh, videogames'. And most people that complain about videogames have never fucking played them."
Movie writer/producer/director **Guillermo del Toro** offers an enthusiastic defence of our favourite things

"Guillermo del Toro – who by the way is an amazing film director – recently signed a deal with THQ to make video games. And I'm thinking… he's never made a video game […] In our industry there's too many people starstruck of the movie world, jumping into deals with some big movie director just because they're big film directors."
Uh-oh. **Ken Levine** slam dunks del Toro (though we shouldn't assume it's a direct response to the above)

"If the presence or absence of the Taliban 'does not fundamentally alter the gameplay', then perhaps it did not matter that this particular Islamist terrorist group found its way into the game in the first place… Playing as the Taliban never mattered anyway. It was just a menu item… just a clever hook to spin free publicity, and just an inconvenient but essentially irrelevant feature to drop when the Army brass raised its eyebrows."
Professor **Ian Bogost** picks apart EA's motives in designing *Medal Of Honor*

"At number ten, it's an online game. It's very popular. It's *Half-Life*, specifically *Half-Life 2*, which is set some time in the near future after the nuclear apocalypse – as it always is. It's a roleplaying game on your PC, like *World Of Warcraft*, but not as fantastical. And you basically have to survive and earn as many points as possible. Some people live on *Half-Life*, like spend half their lives on it. It was the first online game where people started hiring other people to play for them when they went to work. That actually happens."
With his top ten, **DJ Treble T** gets Radio One's Gaming Week off to the sort of start that gets radios smashed to bits



INTERVIEW

Managament report

We talk to the man behind Sports Interactive's Football Manager series to discover how his love of the game makes the transfer

Miles Jacobson, studio director of Sports Interactive, has been working on *Football Manager*, in one form or another, for the best part of two decades. Over that time, SI has grown in size to over 70 full-time staff, and the game itself has increased just as much in scope and complexity. We sit down with Jacobson to discuss his relationship with the series, the blessed sport on which it's based, and why *Football Manager 11* marks a new beginning for the franchise.

You must have got the process of iteration off to a fine art by now. Does it run like clockwork?
Definitely not! We've completely changed our process over the last few years; it used to be very haphazard. What we do is have a features database. We took all the features ideas from our forums, any ideas we got back from Sega, any internal ideas, and we moved them all across to one database. No one knew where any of the ideas came from – everything was treated as a valid idea. We went through 1,500 features and 1,200 of those are now scheduled for the next few iterations. There were a few things that got dropped out this year that will be in next year, and a few that moved from next year's game into the one after. We've got a bunch of new ideas as well that we've come up with during the year.

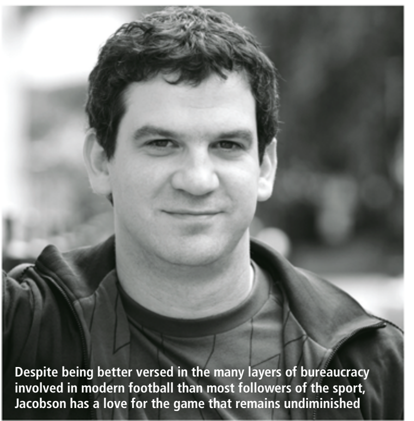
"I have season tickets for three clubs – I'm very passionate about my football. I go to see England as often as I can, and I will literally go to watch any football anywhere in the world"

The experience of making *Football Manager* over the years has presumably changed your attitude to the real game.
There is certain football that I watch now just for its own sake. Watford – which is the team that I support – is totally an escape, and going to see AFC Wimbledon, who we sponsor, is football for football's sake. But if I go to a Premier League game, I'm often watching it from a perspective of what we're doing right and wrong in *Football Manager*. I watch player movement. I went to an England game recently and I was doing, like, player camera with a player, trying to learn their movements, because it was someone who's incredibly fast and in control of the ball. I do find myself looking at those things.

Has that sort of analysis ever threatened your enjoyment of the sport?
There was a period last season where I didn't go to a game for about three weeks – that's probably my longest break ever. I have season tickets for three clubs – I'm very passionate about my football. I go to see England as often as I can, and I will literally go to watch any football anywhere in the world. It's a beautiful game, as they say, and I'm rubbish at it, so watching people playing football is something I still get a huge kick from. There are certain things I wish I didn't know about it on the backroom side. The amount of stuff I know that goes on behind the scenes – some of that I wish I never knew.

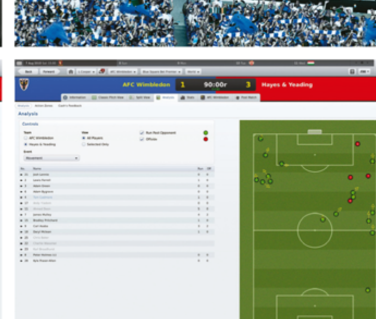


After comments from real-world agents, *FM 2011* contains a greater variety of awkward clauses that players' agents may demand their contracts include. Unlike previous games, contract negotiations can be done in a realtime, 'face-to-face' context



Despite being better versed in the many layers of bureaucracy involved in modern football than most followers of the sport, Jacobson has a love for the game that remains undiminished









How do club boardrooms feel about the side of football that gets exposed by the games, such as agent clauses?
The clauses are there; they're things that happen in football, and we just happen to find out about them before journos, and then journos start talking about them. The squad regulations that have come into play in the Premier League this year, we had them in the game last year. There are a lot of people who were surprised when these new rules came in, except for those who play *Football Manager* and have been planning their squads for this year for ages. Only one person's ever come to us with a problem. It was a chairman, ten years ago, and that's why chairman stats are hidden now – because he had a problem with his personal ratings, which was fair enough.

Do you feel an obligation or a desire to reflect the way management decisions can be affected by players' personal issues?
No, because they shouldn't. Players do get unhappy and homesick in the game, for example, but a newspaper reporting a player's extramarital affairs is not going to happen in *Football Manager*, because I feel really sorry for the players that it happens to. People say that they get offered a lot of money and therefore we own them; we don't. They're human beings and it's none of anybody's business.

You've had to revamp the way B teams work for Spanish and Danish users. How does the process of adding foreign rules to a system designed for English leagues work?
We put the rules in and then we test to bloody death to check there aren't any weird things happening. We have a few people who work on the rule groups, and they work very closely with our research team. We're confident enough with our systems that with *FM10* we released a competition editor for the first time, and there are very few competitions around the world that people have added in that aren't handled by the game. When people try to get down to level 13 and 14 of the English pyramid it has a few problems, because the players are so bad that they can't kick the ball, but above that stage we wouldn't have done the editor if we weren't confident that the game would be able to handle it.

Do you foresee a point in the future when you'll be able to say, "Right, this is done – we can just focus on updating it each year"?
I don't think Sega would allow me to do that! The actual question you're asking there is, "Can you see yourself retiring in a few years?" Because if we've reached that Holy Grail, I can just walk away. We've got so many ideas that we want to see in the game, and football is such a changing world anyway, but we do have a longterm plan. I think it's a series that can keep on for a lot longer than I can, and I do really hope it does, because so many people get enjoyment from playing our game and I'm really proud of that. But if we did ever come up with something that we were really happy with, we would be more than likely to turn round and say, "That's it – here's a data editor and you can update the data each year. We're going to do something else."

What part of the yearly cycle do you enjoy the most?
My personal favourite moment is when I first start taking builds of the game and I'm able to start playing through and coming up with ideas to polish it. That's probably because it's the time of year when I'm being most creative. I'm not a full-time games designer – a lot of my time is spent doing business and PR stuff. Designing is my favourite time but it's probably not the thing I'm best at. It's a clear few weeks of playing the game, which is absolutely brilliant.



INTERVIEW







Shadows Of The Damned looks like a wild action-horror ride. Suda 51's eye for flair will hopefully be backed up by Mikami's grasp of action game excess

Guiding light

The father of Resident Evil discusses his partnership with Grasshopper Manufacture

At the relatively tender age of 45, **Shinji Mikami** (above) is an industry veteran. A summary of his career is a devastating mix of bullets and bullet points: director of the genre-defining *Resident Evil* and *Resident Evil 4*, *P.N.03*, *God Hand* and *Vanquish* (reviewed on p86); producer on countless titles from *Steel Battalion* to *Viewtiful Joe*; former Capcom prodigy turned heavyweight independent. His latest project, *Shadows Of The Damned*, is a joint pitch with Suda 51 that will be published under the EA Partners label. Here, he explains his contribution.

How do the responsibilities divide between you and Suda on *Shadows Of The Damned*?
This is very much Suda's project. He's the global overseer and has the last word on any issues that come out during the course of the development. I'm in charge of the game's balance, systems and mechanics.

How did the collaboration begin?
While we were working on *Killer 7* he told me the idea. I found it very interesting indeed and told him that one day it would be great to work on it.

"EA are careful not to interfere too much with our work. They are very respectful of us as a Japanese developer – they are very kind and highly value our creativity"

This was about five years ago. It became a reality thanks to the support of EA Partners.

This is at the same time as making *Vanquish*, and founding your own studio. Hard work?
It was hell on Earth! You have no idea. But I had to do all those things. However, the projects didn't interfere with each other – the main issue was time. I hope my various endeavours didn't impact too much on Suda-san. Yes, it has been a very hard time – and still is, to be honest.

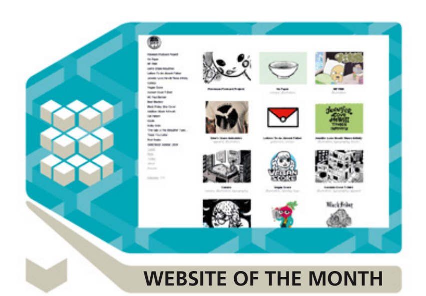
The project has allegedly been in production for four years – why has it taken so long?
How the hell do you know this? The official line is 'over two years' and, in that sense, you are right. We're well into our third year, at least for my part. For Grasshopper this is a big project, and their first experience with the Unreal Engine. It is also a multiplatform project and totally new IP, so it's no surprise that the project took time. We had to face many things at the same time. Plus, I had to finish *Vanquish* first, using any free time to work on this game and manage my new company [Tango].

So, would you say this is a Grasshopper game?
This is a Grasshopper game, so in that sense I had to keep that unique charm the studio has a reputation for. My main objective was to break through some of the problems associated with Grasshopper games. What I mean by that is, in the beginning you are impressed by the world, the ambience of the game, but as you go deeper that tension fades. My work is to keep that tension strong – to make sure first impressions are representative of the rest of the game.

How have you found it working with a western publisher?
EA are careful not to interfere too much with our work. They are very respectful of us as a Japanese developer – they are very kind. They are demanding, yes, and you feel a greater pressure than with a Japanese publisher, but it was nothing like I had expected. They highly value our creativity. I think the main issue is the language barrier – I like it when parties are able to confront ideas directly, and we can't currently do that.

Why haven't we seen a playable version after this much development time?
Well, that's a good question. I think you have to ask our valued partner, EA!





WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Clearly, Mare Odomo is a talented artist with a broad portfolio, but it's Pokémon that have brought him internet fame. A short series of poignant strips called Letters To An Absent Father casts a new light on the struggles of Ash and his monsters to make their way in the Poké-world (you can buy a copy with your choice of illustration). This has been followed up by the Pokémon Postcard Project, which does what it says on the tin for a high price, alongside many other game and non-game projects. Our favourite is probably a chubby Buddha in the 'Pixel Dudes' series – but everything here's worth a lunchtime browse.

Site: Mare Odomo
URL: tinyurl.com/mareodomo









A life of crime

The producer of Yakuza 4 on turning the franchise into an ensemble drama

R*yu Ga Gotoku Of The End* – the unexpectedly zombie-packed *Yakuza* sequel that Sega announced at the Tokyo Game Show – might be the *Yakuza* game that the company is currently working on, but western fans of the series have yet to get their hands on the series' more traditional previous outing, *Yakuza 4*. The fourth entry in Sega's urban brawler franchise gives players the chance to play as three other protagonists alongside the series' dapper star, Kazuma, and sees a return to the Tokyo backstreets in which the series began. We talk to producer **Masayoshi Kikuchi** (above) about the game, the series, and the gangs that inspired it.

For *Yakuza 4* you've introduced new playable characters. Is this a sign that Kazuma's story has been told?
It's not that the story of Kazuma as we know it is told; it's more that we wanted to provide new points of view. In this game we were able to provide totally different stories and give players more variety in this story. The idea was to provide a realistic experience of an underground Tokyo community by playing it from these multiple standpoints.

How do you personally feel about the Yakuza syndicates?
Nowadays Yakuza is recognised as a criminal society, and I'm pretty much in line with that. But the Yakuza we're trying to depict in this game are not just a bunch of thugs. We wanted to focus on the old tradition of Yakuza, because historically it is true that Yakuza had a sort of function within a community of people. When Japan was really poor – this was right after Japan lost the war – and the country was devastated, they needed something else besides the police and authorities that would help them go through the hard times. It's kind of a little bit fantasised, the good old Yakuza that we're trying to describe here.

"The Yakuza we're trying to depict in this game are not just a bunch of thugs… It's kind of a little bit fantasised, the good old Yakuza that we're trying to describe here"

Ultimately, do you think the games are pro- or anti-Yakuza?
The game in general is neither pro- nor anti- the Yakuza. I guess it has both sides, but even the good Yakuza, by definition, are not exactly law-abiding citizens. They're deviating from normal rules, but they believe in respect for each other and looking after clan members – they have their own set of value systems and rules.

Is the series' unrealistic approach to fighting a way of stepping away from the reality of Tokyo's urban violence?
Yes, those sorts of actions – the way you just walk around and start a fight – that's very fantasised and pretty videogamey. You wouldn't see that when you're walking around in Tokyo. Some of those scenes are exaggerated pretty powerfully.



Despite the game's modern-day setting, Kikuchi says *Yakuza 4* reflects a time when the Yakuza had a more defined role within Japanese society rather than simply being regarded as a criminal organisation



Ryu Ga Gotoku Of The End **marks a departure for the *Yakuza* series, as its protagonists – including franchise stalwart Kazuma – battle hordes of the undead in fictional Kamurocho**

Did you intend for the series to have this many instalments?
No, we weren't really planning on making so many instalments – we had this one idea to make this kind of game, then we're just back by popular demand. We always had this sort of central motif or theme throughout the instalments, which is to depict this society through the eyes of an ex-con, so that is the sense that hasn't changed. This thing is really rich and full of variety, so we don't really have to scratch our heads to do something different; there's always new ideas coming up.

Were you surprised by the way your western fanbase has embraced a game rooted in contemporary Japanese culture?
We're definitely proud of the fanbase we have in the western market, and we're really pleased to have people really like our games, which are uniquely based on a Japanese cultural tradition. It's been good to get across the message and introduce what the Yakuza is. Also, while [the games] are based on a marginal, underground society, some of the venues you see in the game, the bowling alleys and night clubs, are the places that normal people go. They're the places that we go to with friends, so that's kind of an interesting and educative aspect.

Continue

Boxed games
One day we'll bottle that new-manual smell

Collaborations
Mikami and Suda, Del Toro and THQ – who's next?

The past – today!
***Retro City Rampage* sure scratches that 8bit itch**

Quit

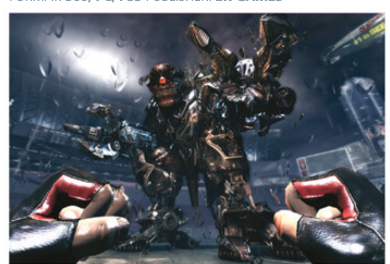
Cheap AV cabinets
When it comes to the important stuff, *spend*

Visions of Christmas
They're coming. Oh, yes. Hold on to your wallets

Boxed games
Hey, like we have any shelf space left anyway

Duke Nukem Forever

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**



What's more incredible: the news that Gearbox has revived it, the signs that it's actually fun, or the scenes at last month's FirstLook in Amsterdam involving Randy Pitchford and a massive penis?

Dead Rising Mobile

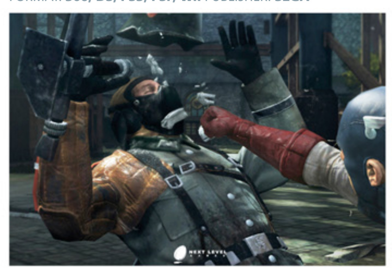
FORMAT: **IPHONE** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



Say what you like about its thirdparty legacy, but Capcom knows when it's on to a good thing, at least. After the success of *Street Fighter IV* comes this chunky, social-network-enabled port

Captain America: Super Soldier

FORMAT: **360, DS, PS3, PSP, WII** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**



Sega's Iron Man games don't inspire confidence, especially when the quality of superhero franchises seems inversely proportional to the format count. Chances of this being a dud: five formats

Star Trek: Infinite Space

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **GAMEFORGE**



After the less-than-stellar *Star Trek Online*, can the German maker of *What's Cooking? With Jamie Oliver* do better with a free-to-play take on DS9? Signs point toward Facebook as the platform

FAST – Racing League

FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **SHIN'EN MULTIMEDIA**



In the absence of *F-Zero*, Shin'en fills the void and introduces 'phase matching' – an *Ikaruga*-style system of switching your ship between positive and negative forms to match the track colour

Ico And SOTC Collection

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCEE**



After the remastering of Kratos' first two trips to hell and back, the prospect of Fumito Ueda's classics in a similar HD glory is irresistible. Full 3D support should make the colossi stand out

Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D

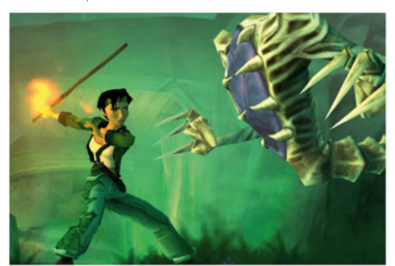
FORMAT: **3DS** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



The second announced *Resi* on 3DS combines Mercenaries levels from both the fourth and fifth games – but the real stories are the authentic visuals and commitment to online co-op via Wi-Fi

Beyond Good & Evil HD

FORMAT: 360, PS3 PUBLISHER: UBISOFT



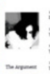
In this 1080p treatment of Michel Ancel's 2003 sleeper, character models, textures and soundtrack are being overhauled – with apparently better results than Ubi's *Prince Of Persia HD Collection*

EDF: Insect Armageddon

FORMAT: 360, PS3 PUBLISHER: **D3 PUBLISHER**



"The most concentrated giant insect invasion ever", promises the sequel to *EDF 2017*, now the second most concentrated giant insect invasion. Not being made by series creator Sandlot, sadly



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

The Argument

tinyurl.com/thearg

Game designer Harvey Smith – of *Deus Ex* and *Thief* fame – has used his spare time to further explore his passion for immersive environments. *The Argument* is a piece of 'interactive fiction' – a text adventure in the purest sense, with an emotional centrepoint. You're put in the shoes of one side of an argument that's just erupted, picking up your character's baton as they're left, bewildered, in the bathroom, the screech of tyres and screams of anger still ringing in your ears.

From here it's an engrossing whodunnit in which you piece together the story by inspecting the environments. Cursory details are your avenues for adventure, snippets of authorial description needing to be queried in order to progress. It's a novel, bare-bones and cerebral detour for your brain.

When *The Argument*, which was completed as 'homework' for Smith's college course, is over, it's worth exploring the rest of the designer's online archives. A particular highlight is the presentation for his GDC 2006 category-winning game brief, Peace Bomb.



The rise and rise of gamification

Piers Harding-Rolls believes the game industry is facing up to a big opportunity in the wider world

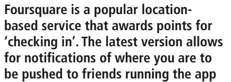
If you follow games industry news, you will be aware of a saturation of commentary and general industry talk about 'gamification' of or 'gamifying' other industries, services and applications. Gamification involves the taking of games design, mechanics or service processes into other vertical industries and using them to improve internal working practices or to immerse and attract customers and improve loyalty through consumer-facing strategies. Perhaps the biggest gamification effort in recent decades has been centred on the loyalty card across many industries, including supermarket chains, department stores, petrol retailers and airlines. The drivers for involvement here commonly involve consumer rewards, which sometimes spill into social standing (eg, airline upgrades).

In contrast, many recent gamification efforts involve virtual rewards, which can be shared across social graphs and are therefore altogether significantly cheaper to implement. A 'wrapper' of gamification even extends to enabling applications and activities that are built specifically to use these mechanics. In these cases, the customer-facing game mechanics are integral to the popularity of some non-gaming applications. In parallel to this explosion in interest in games from other industries have been the rise of the social network, massive

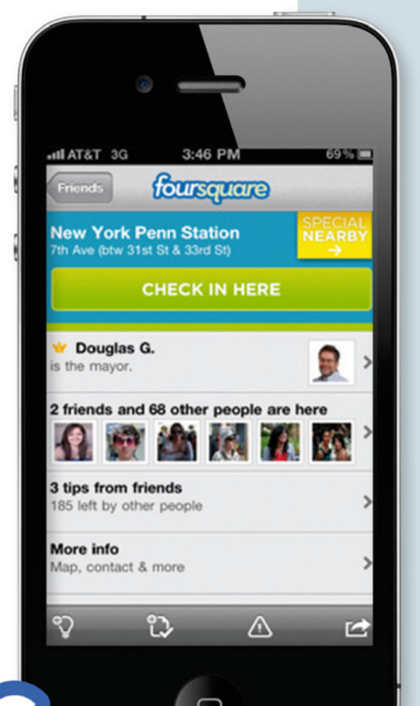
This first stage of gamification fixated on rewards, achievements and leaderboards is reaching saturation. So what comes next?

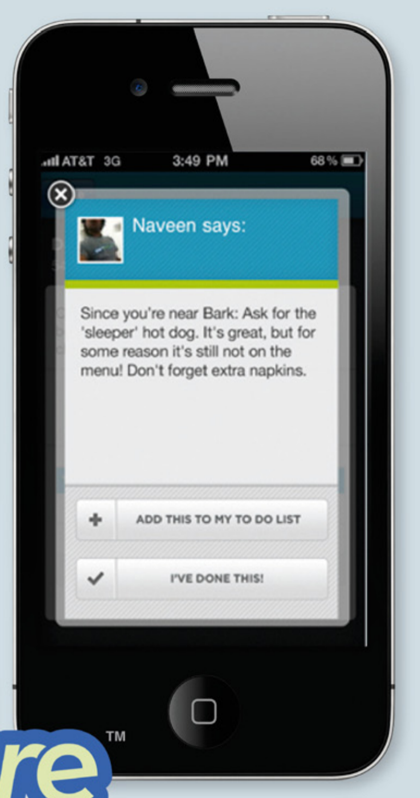
social virality and the concept of the social graph. Today's simple gamification efforts make use of consumers' social graphs, social network usage and new 'social' devices such as smartphones. Examples of these basic reward systems across applications include Foursquare, Gowalla, TrustedOpinion and The Life Game. To enable these game 'wrappers', gamification service providers have sprung up such as Badgeville, GetGlue, BigDoor, Reputely and Bunchball.

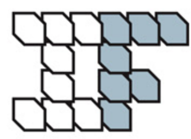
This first stage of rampant gamification fixated on rewards, achievements and leaderboards is quickly reaching saturation. So what comes next? And how can the games industry take advantage? Well, Sebastian Deterding's recent and very articulate presentation at the Playful 2010 conference (you can find it on SlideShare) suggested that a lot of these recent gamification efforts were missing essential ingredients around the concept of freedom of play, game mastery and



Foursquare is a popular location-based service that awards points for 'checking in'. The latest version allows for notifications of where you are to be pushed to friends running the app

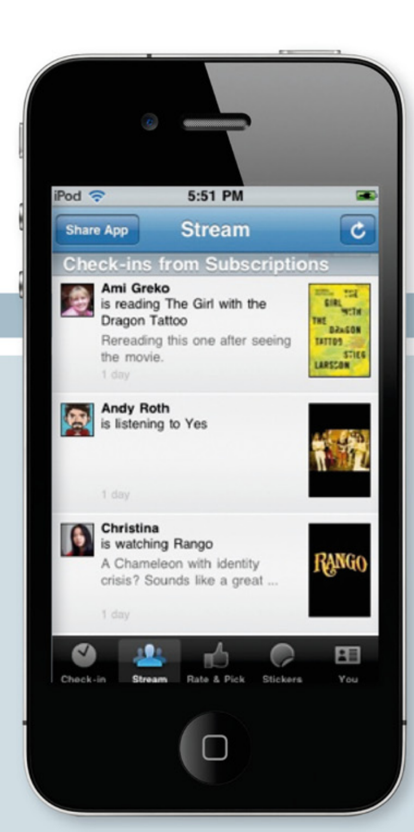


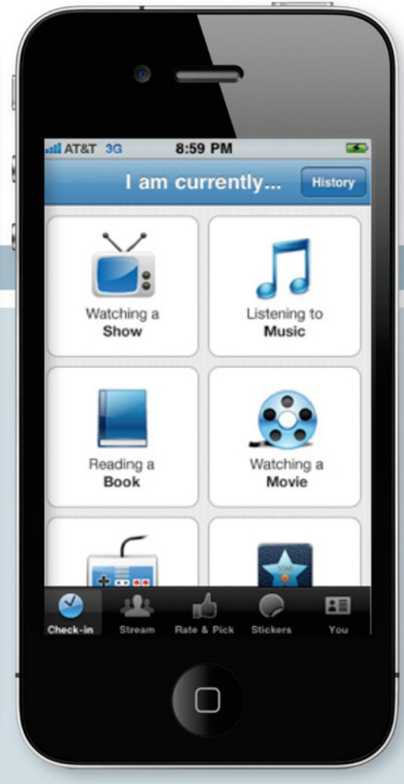






www.screendigest.com





GetGlue (left) is a more entertainment-focused app, allowing users to share their tastes and opinions with their friends. It suggests books, movies or music based on what you've liked in the past

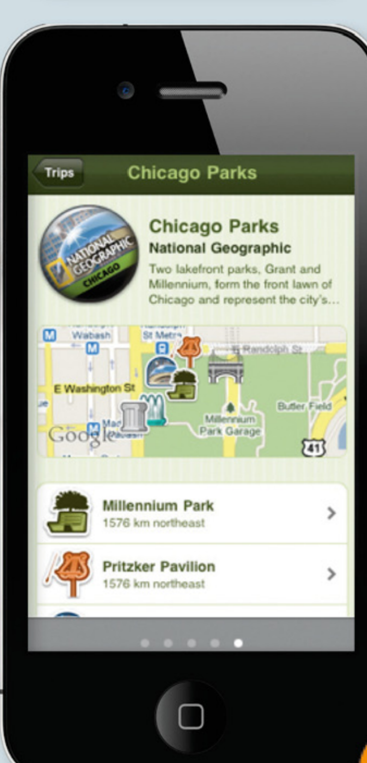


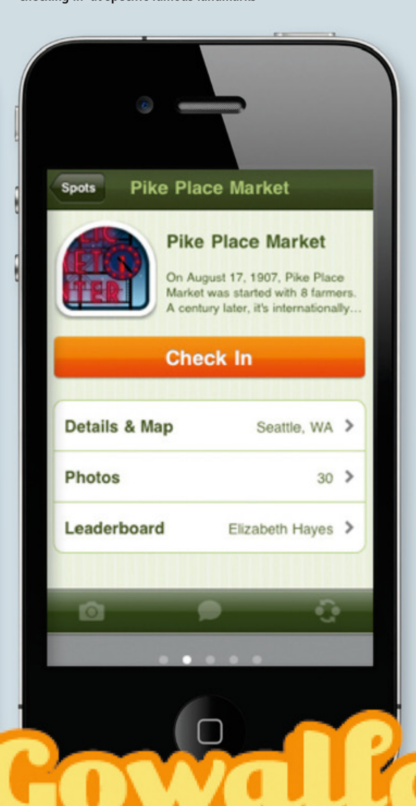
Gowalla (below) takes the notion of 'checking in' at a location a step further by introducing 'items' that can be collected and swapped among users. Special icons are awarded for 'checking in' at specific famous landmarks

achievements – or, to put it more simply, a proper understanding and implementation of fun.

These are elements that most games developers tackle on a daily basis and, in the next stage of gamification, will become increasingly relevant. In-depth and well-tested expertise in game design is unlikely to come from the gamification service providers that have sprung up to layer virtual rewards on to applications, but from experts within the games industry. I believe this provides the games industry with a window of opportunity to not only spread its business interest and to tap new markets outside of pure entertainment – markets which, judging by current coverage and expected funding interest, are likely to be lucrative – but also to raise the industry's profile as a whole across the wider business sector.

This evolution also suggests that parallel developments in serious games and augmented reality applications will converge and align more strongly with gamification efforts in the future, with the result of slowly bringing games design expertise to its role as a core discipline and process within many non-entertainment-based industries. As this gamification evolution unfolds we will see more closely what impact this will have on the games industry, but my view is that this is a new and disruptive front which is likely to offer plenty of commercial promise to games companies in the short to medium term and, in the long term, open up new channels for games design to influence other industries as these concepts are legitimised through new roles created within business organisations.



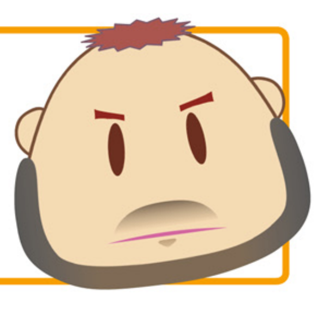


SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

Crime and the lack of punishment

Game producer Brick Bardo on consumers' attitudes towards piracy



Japanese developers are very excited about the 3DS – but especially about one thing. The increase in power? The simple development tools? Maybe it's this incredible 3D effect, or the prospect of another flood of sales? All these features are important, but one more so than others: the protection against piracy.

You could argue that the history of videogames since the Famicom's launch has been a long series of struggles against Magicoms. Magicom is a word to describe any device that makes copying software and playing it possible on your console. Japan's always had its share of piracy problems but, speaking as someone who's spent a long time in and around the industry, it seems to me that people used to be much more ashamed about it. People used to hide the fact they used a Magicom – like smoking or drinking when you're underage. They knew what they were doing was wrong and illegal. But that changed with the DS – kids, not even hardcore gamers or obsessives, were using these Magicom systems without any shame in public.

This generation has no sense of what is right or wrong with software. When I ask kids about using these devices, they say: "It's free – so what?" Or: "My friends have them at school." But the worst response? "My parents bought it for me."

There are parents like that. Now try to teach a kid, who's got no sense of what is right or wrong other than what they're told, about copyright. I would hope parents would tell their children: "Using a Magicom and downloading copies is wrong." But no! They buy their kids a Magicom instead.

It's a massive problem for developers. For example, consider an official tournament for a game. You have candidates attending with Magicoms and copied games. Then you have an official telling these kids they can't take part in the tournament. Then they will begin to cry, and you have the parents reacting angrily at that official: "Hey, why the hell can't my kid participate?" It's a strange world where we, the developers, have to explain to these brazen people that you can't participate in an official event using an illegal copy of our software.

But the real victim here is the poor kid. He or she spent a lot of time improving a character or building the best deck of cards, probably with that event in the back of their mind. And when the day comes, they're sent away. They must feel terrible.

People used to hide the fact they used a Magicom – like smoking or drinking when you're underage. But that changed with the DS – kids, not even hardcore gamers or obsessives, were using these Magicom systems without any shame

When a kid says to you, "Everybody has one, everybody does that," there's not much you can do. But when it's the parents saying these things, you wonder about their morality.

You get a little insight online. Common things I read are "I bought my kid a Magicom because we don't have the money to buy games. What's wrong about that?" or "All his friends have one so he had to have one to be part of the group." I have to admit that, putting yourself in their shoes, you can understand a little why people do these things. But I still don't accept the arguments

Nintendo's 3DS hardware has a copy protection system that, according to THQ's executive VP of global publishing Ian Curran, is difficult to explain "because it's so sophisticated"

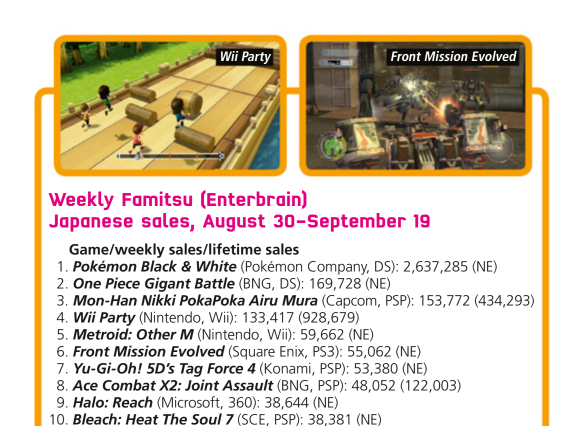
because fundamentally games are a luxury – it's not like stealing bread because you're starving. No one will die if you don't buy a Magicom.

Nintendo is prosecuting the makers of these devices in many countries, and the result varies according to the legislation in that territory. In Italy, England and Australia, the Magicom has been banned. In Spain and France, Nintendo lost. In Japan, the devices are banned but since there is no criminal punishment set, any further prosecutions are decided on a case-by-case basis.

That is why Nintendo president **Satoru Iwata**'s words at the Nintendo Conference 2010 have a very big resonance for us developers: "As a platform holder, we have the responsibility of addressing this issue. When a new platform is launched, like the 3DS, it is an opportunity to perfect any forms of protection. We are very serious about it. But to those saying that games don't sell because of piracy, I think that is just an excuse. If you try hard to deliver an experience that is appealing and fun to people, even with piracy around, the game will sit at the top of the charts."

Iwata is right: piracy is a big problem, but we cannot blame it for all the problems developers have. That being said, you have to acknowledge that the current situation with piracy is very painful for game makers, and especially those that want to work on the DS. The 3DS has protection systems that are way more advanced than the DS's, and it's good that a platform holder is doing that.

But what bothers me is the widespread belief among gamers that piracy is OK. I don't think it will ever be fully eradicated, but that doesn't mean it should be socially acceptable. Perhaps we need to be as draconian as clearly stating on every game and game advert that piracy is a crime punishable by law? The entire industry has to come together to address this shift in morality: game makers, platform holders, retailers, magazines like **Edge**, and gamers with any self respect. If we don't, then developers and gamers are preparing for a world in which even more development time is spent building even more restrictions on software. It's a vicious circle that will harm everyone, just because certain people are greedy enough to want everything for free – and we meekly let their shameful attitude pass without comment. Or, worse, because they're doing it, we think we should be doing it too.



Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain)
Japanese sales, August 30–September 19

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

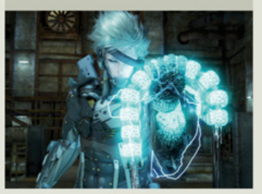
1. ***Pokémon Black & White*** (Pokémon Company, DS): 2,637,285 (NE)
2. ***One Piece Gigant Battle*** (BNG, DS): 169,728 (NE)
3. ***Mon-Han Nikki PokaPoka Airu Mura*** (Capcom, PSP): 153,772 (434,293)
4. ***Wii Party*** (Nintendo, Wii): 133,417 (928,679)
5. ***Metroid: Other M*** (Nintendo, Wii): 59,662 (NE)
6. ***Front Mission Evolved*** (Square Enix, PS3): 55,062 (NE)
7. ***Yu-Gi-Oh! 5D's Tag Force 4*** (Konami, PSP): 53,380 (NE)
8. ***Ace Combat X2: Joint Assault*** (BNG, PSP): 48,052 (122,003)
9. ***Halo: Reach*** (Microsoft, 360): 38,644 (NE)
10. ***Bleach: Heat The Soul 7*** (SCE, PSP): 38,381 (NE)

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

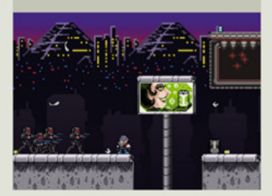
Edge's most wanted

MGS Rising



Konami is quiet about the series reinvention – but all we can think about is chopping that melon. OK, maybe we've fantasised a little bit about filleting cyborgs, too.
360, PS3, KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS

Hook World



Super Quickhook was the making of one **Edge** staffer's holiday, and this – a series of endless modes, all with competitive multiplayer – should be the icing on the cake.
IPHONE, ROCKETCAT GAMES

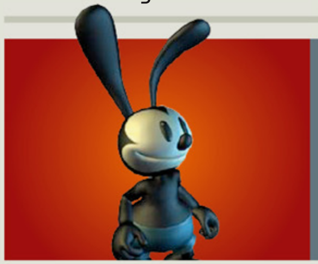
Dance Central



Microsoft wouldn't let us loose to review it this issue, but we've played enough to want more. If the multiplayer's great, this is going to be a party favourite.
360, HARMONIX

Disney's digital ambitions

How the old giants of media finally woke up to gaming



Epic Mickey's villain, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit (left), is a key figure in Disney history – but the company only grabbed back (most) of the rights to him from Universal in 2006. We wonder when game development kicked off…

Disney is one of the biggest entertainment companies on the planet. But despite our fond memories of those early Capcom productions (did you know Shinji Mikami's first design credit is on *Goof Troop*?), it's never been a very serious player in videogames.

That has been changing for a while now, and 2010 could be a turning point for the House of Mouse. Since Bob Iger took over as company president and CEO in 2005, its investment in gaming and interactive online hubs has grown enormously. In that time Disney has acquired, among others, *Club Penguin* developer New Horizon Interactive, Junction Point (*Epic Mickey*), Wideload (*Stubbs The Zombie*), Propaganda Games (*Tron: Evolution*), Black Rock Studio (*Split Second*) and Avalanche Software (*Toy Story 3*).

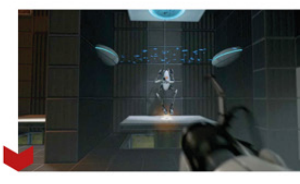
Suits across the globe salivate at the pots of gold in gaming, particularly social gaming, which was what led to Disney's most headline-grabbing acquisition. Playdom was big on MySpace, OK on Facebook, and Disney bought it for a whopping $563 million (with a further $200 million linked to growth targets) – a price that even optimists think was a bit high.

But forget the cash. What this shows is a strategic direction from a non-gaming heavyweight: it wants to be a gaming heavyweight. For Disney, games used to mean supplementary revenue from licensing out its IP, but now it's realised what the future looks like.

It's hard to think that the company's investment won't win it a major place in the videogame industry. *Split Second* showed that it's willing to invest in high-quality original properties, while the upcoming triumvirate of *Epic Mickey*, *Tron* and *Pirates Of The Caribbean* marks a step-change in how these licences are brought into the interactive living room.

And it's not just Disney. Look at what *Batman: Arkham Asylum* has done for Warner Bros. Consider 2009's *Ghostbusters* game, with its top-tier cast and visuals, and the investment being made into videogaming by old-school toy companies like Lego.

Regardless of whether or not Disney's next wave of releases get it precisely right, the company is demonstrating that it is taking videogames seriously. What so many game industry observers once perceived as a dinosaur has evolved.









FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2011**

Portal 2

Valve enters the home makeover business in a paint-filled sequel



Portals work – that's obvious. The process of opening wormholes in the test chambers of Valve's 2007 puzzle game felt right immediately, even as your spatial awareness declared it categorically wrong. But in three wonky, funny and expertly paced hours, *Portal* seemed to explore the concept fully. It definitely deserved a sequel, but it wasn't clear if it really needed one.

So Valve tried leaving portals behind. Perhaps the *Portal* series was really about Aperture Science, and each game would focus on an entirely new mechanic. Several ideas were tried, the best developed to the point at which they could be playtested, but the result was the same every time: "This is cool, but where's my portal gun?"

> Portal 2 is something more playful and creative. Your first idea for a solution might not work, but it may reconfigure the game space in a surprising and entertainingly fatal way

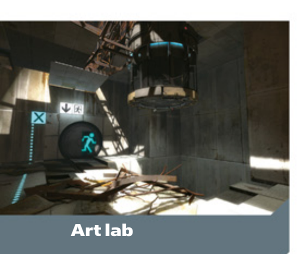
Portals work too well to scrap. So *Portal 2* reexamined the mechanics they had tried to replace portals with, and tried integrating them. Most of them didn't work. "Either they're just redundant," says writer **Erik Wolpaw**, "or they ruin each other." The ones that did work were the ones that let the player change his environment, because the portal gun gives you a way of manipulating those changes further. Wolpaw says it's about "elements that combinatorially [sic] will create this much larger puzzle space" – mechanics that change what you can do with portals rather than replacing them.

That's the theme extended through every other element that's been worked into *Portal 2*. Bridges of solid light are projected from the walls – use portals to redirect them to cross the level wherever you like. Lasers lace the levels – use portals to point them where you need the power, or where you need turrets to fatally overheat. Tractor beams suck you and everything else inexorably in one direction – use portals to change that direction and ride them wherever you like. And lurid paint belches, grotesquely, from dirty nozzles – use portals to launch it through the air, splatter it on walls, drench enemies and even yourself.

The paint does more than redecorate. It's one of the mechanics that was at one point the core of the game. It changes the physical properties of the surfaces it hits: blue paint makes them shunt things away, essentially letting you design and place your own jump pads. Orange paint is slippery, accelerating your movement to let you fling yourself through the most hazardous bits of a test chamber. And there are at least two other types, one being some variation of sticky paint, letting you climb any surface you've slathered with it.

In practice, these mechanics change the style of *Portal 2*'s puzzle-solving from cue-spotting and hoop-jumping to something more playful and creative. Your first idea for a solution might not work, but it may reconfigure the game space in a surprising and entertainingly fatal way. The final act of the first *Portal* did appear to let you off your leash a bit, but the solutions still weren't as creative as *Portal 2*'s.

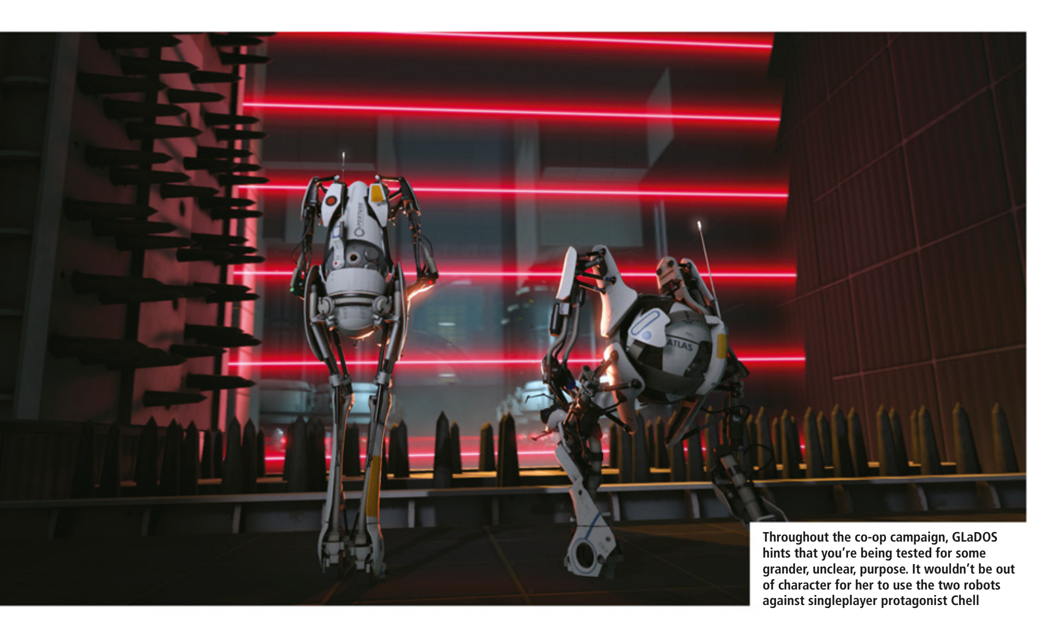
In total, *Portal 2* is around four times as long – but only half of that is a singleplayer sequel to the original. The other six-hour campaign is for two players, both controlling awkward robots with their own pair of portals, in test chambers designed to test co-operation. They're at the mercy of the



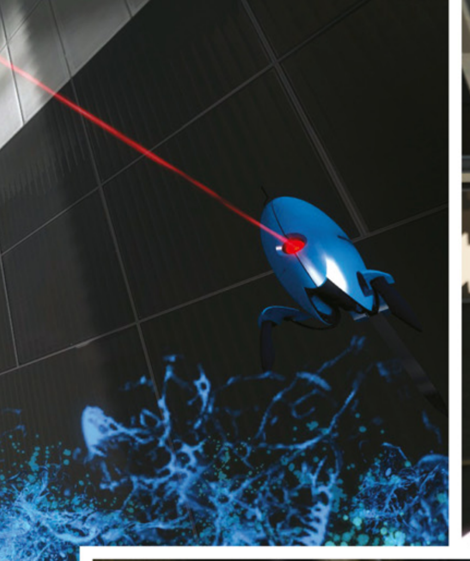
Art lab

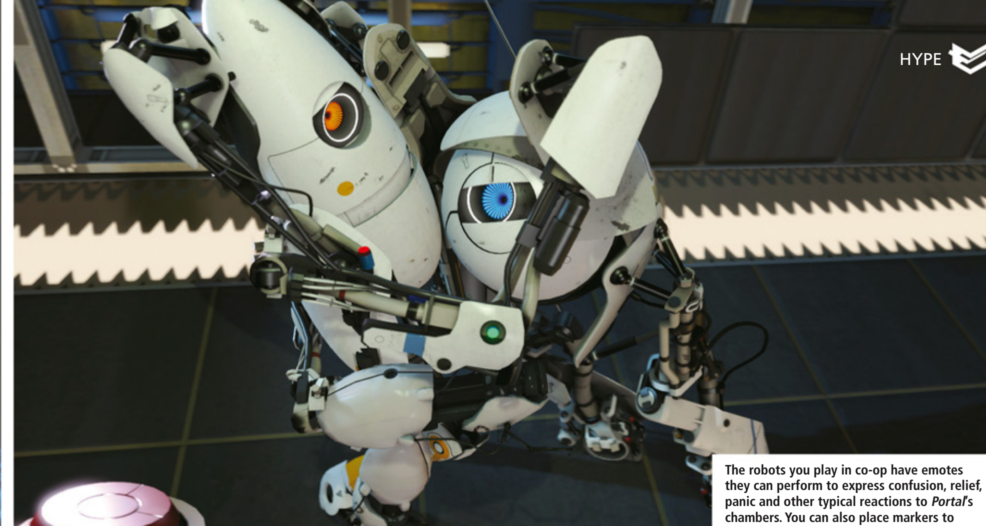
***Portal*'s clinical style was only partly a design choice: there wasn't enough time to devote a lot of art talent to it. The sequel is a much larger project, and its look and feel have been given as much work and thought as a *Half-Life* game.**

The result is a crumbling lab, split between starkly lit chambers and gloomy but dizzyingly vast pipeworks behind the scenes. GLaDOS is trying to form these chambers for you on the fly, but Aperture Science is in ruins. Plates on pistons judder out to form a wall, then spark and gibber into an angular wreck. Bits of the scenery peel off and tumble into the slime, and vines creep incongruously through the sterile ruins. It's both sad and sinister.



Throughout the co-op campaign, GLaDOS hints that you're being tested for some grander, unclear, purpose. It wouldn't be out of character for her to use the two robots against singleplayer protagonist Chell





The robots you play in co-op have emotes they can perform to express confusion, relief, panic and other typical reactions to *Portal*'s chambers. You can also place markers to tell your partner where to put their portals





The fluid physics are satisfyingly gloopy. They have to be: portals let you fling blobs of paint into tractor beams or bounce them quivering into the air by manipulating their momentum

There's a sense that Aperture is being rebuilt: this whole section takes place in a turret factory, showing every stage of their creation. *Portal*'s labs felt small; its sequel reveals the test centre to be much more expansive

main game's antagonist, GLaDOS, but it's not clear yet where or when their adventure takes place. *Portal 2* is set years after the original, but all Valve will say about the co-op story is that you'll know where and when it takes place by the end of the singleplayer game.

It doesn't matter hugely: GLaDOS and the other AIs in *Portal 2* aren't guiding and jibing you as much as in the singleplayer game. Story progression takes a back seat, simply because most of the time, someone else is talking: you. *Portal 2*'s co-op chambers are designed around the principle that no puzzle should be solvable alone. If they were, Valve found in playtesting, the more skilled player would race ahead and get impatient with his slower companion.

Instead, every obstacle requires cooperation, coordination, and even verbal planning. Many are timing-based – a challenge type Valve found frustrated players in singleplayer but excited them when playing with a friend. Screw-ups tend to be funny rather than irritating when playing socially. Apart from anything, you simply can't fail in co-op: there are dozens of entertaining ways to die, but you're simply rebuilt by GLaDOS at the start of the chamber. Your friend carries on uninterrupted, and the puzzle is as you left it.

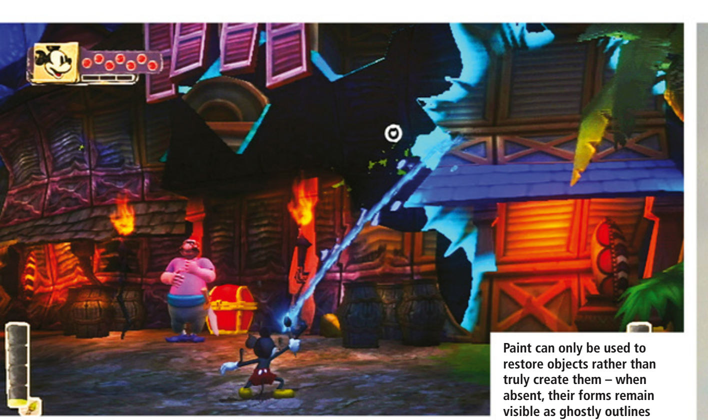
In that respect, it made sense to make co-op play easier. But in terms of intellectual challenge, Valve has taken it as an opportunity to stretch lateral thinking to ridiculous extents. Puzzle setups are patently impossible in entirely new ways, and solutions require configurations of portals that would be tough even if one player could place all four. When each of you is trying to place your two portals in the right place not just for you, but for your partner to use as well, it gets complicated.

But, surprisingly, not daunting. The puzzles are an order of magnitude more intricate than any in *Portal*, but having a partner to discuss ideas with changes your approach completely. Different people tackle mental challenges in different ways, and comparing notes often gets you to a solution much sooner than you'd think. At the risk of over-using the only line from the original that hasn't been quoted to tedium yet: the impossible is easy.

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **DISNEY**
DEVELOPER: **JUNCTION POINT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 30**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E209, E217**

Epic Mickey

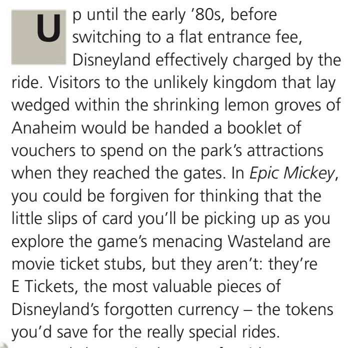
There's no doubting Junction Point's intentions as it takes on the crown jewels of the Magic Kingdom – but is there a game in amongst the branding?



Paint can only be used to restore objects rather than truly create them – when absent, their forms remain visible as ghostly outlines

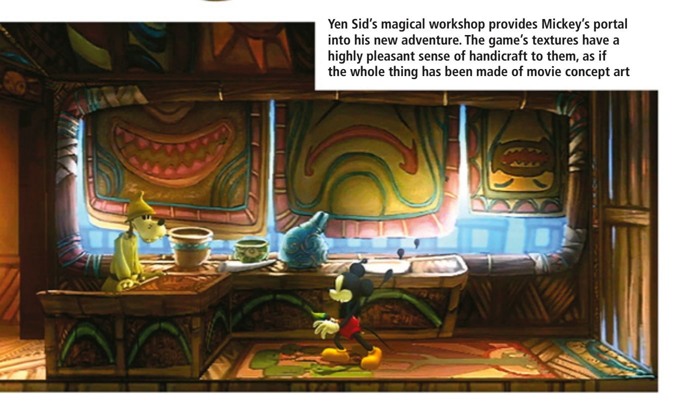


Up until the early '80s, before switching to a flat entrance fee, Disneyland effectively charged by the ride. Visitors to the unlikely kingdom that lay wedged within the shrinking lemon groves of Anaheim would be handed a booklet of vouchers to spend on the park's attractions when they reached the gates. In *Epic Mickey*, you could be forgiven for thinking that the little slips of card you'll be picking up as you explore the game's menacing Wasteland are movie ticket stubs, but they aren't: they're E Tickets, the most valuable pieces of Disneyland's forgotten currency – the tokens you'd save for the really special rides.



Rarely has a single part of a videogame (a collectable, at that) had so much to say about the whole. *Epic Mickey* is a love-in rather than a cash-in: instead of offering up a cheap exercise in licensing, Junction Point is conducting a dark and historically minded ramble around one of the modern world's most powerful brands. It isn't aiming to hit all the popular notes before turning in early, in other words. In fact, Mickey's latest adventure revels in the kind of references only the keenest fans are going to catch.

Yen Sid's magical workshop provides Mickey's portal into his new adventure. The game's textures have a highly pleasant sense of handicraft to them, as if the whole thing has been made of movie concept art



The game's opening stages play out in a nightmarish riff on Sleeping Beauty's famous castle, freshly refitted with suits of duck-shaped armour and a massive robot hand

As the studio's legacy in hand-drawn animation is swiftly eclipsed by the focus-grouped savvy of Pixar, there probably hasn't been a better time to take a fresh look at the secret worlds of Uncle Walt. With *Deus Ex* creator Warren Spector at the helm, it shouldn't be too surprising to discover that *Epic Mickey* has a fairly cerebral (and distinctly menacing) take on the animation giant, sending the famous mouse on a quest to purify a warped version of the Disney universe – a place that's ruled by Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, the company's forgotten former mascot, who's grown bitter at being cast aside.

It's a story plucked from the dark side of the studio's imagination – the side that has always been more interested in scaring children than selling them lunchboxes – and Junction Point brings this vision to bear with the kind of attention to detail that most Wii titles simply can't afford. The game's opening stages play out in a nightmarish riff on Sleeping Beauty's famous castle, freshly refitted with suits of duck-shaped armour and a massive robot hand cobbled together from penknives. Beyond that, Disney's most iconic locations and concepts all receive their own antic redesigns – the levels built around specific parts of the Disneyland parks being particularly well realised. With flimsy clapboard backdrops and shonky, stuttering animatronics whirring away sadly in the background, for all its fantasy this can be an uncommonly honest look at the entertainment industry.

The game nestled in among the branding is initially rather hard to get a handle on. To Spector, *Epic Mickey*'s a boldly 'genreless'





Blending 2D and 3D sequences has allowed Junction Point to reference a wide range of classic Disney cartoons. It's likely that much of the finer detailing will go soaring over the head of the average ten-year-old player, however



Back to the drawing board

In making a kids' action game that still finds time to flirt with RPG elements, it should hardly be surprising to discover that Junction Point has been frantically blending 2D and 3D in order to capture the Disney imagination. While the side-scrolling platform sections that link the game's zones are glorified loading screens for the most part, the cutscenes make a real impact, aping the chalky sketches and ad-libbed stylings of animation storyboards.





experience, an artful action game that hinges on choice and consequence as well as bottom-bounces and platforming. At heart, however, what seems to be emerging is a lavish cartoon adventure featuring a well-signposted central campaign riddled with side-quests. Shifting between linear dungeon-like sections and hubs filled with chatty NPCs, the game offers a sneaky, stage-managed freedom that should prove intoxicating for completionists.

Choice and consequence are still buried deep within this design, however, with a central narrative that shifts and branches depending on how you approach the situations you're thrown up against, and a populace that will respond to you accordingly. At the heart of it all is the paint and thinner mechanic, Mickey's primary means of interacting with the world, either by painting in new pieces of scenery or rubbing old bits out.

In terms of traversal and puzzle-solving, it's fairly binary stuff, and the game imposes strict limitations on which walls you can bring down and which staircases you can build up. In terms of combat, however, things get considerably more interesting, as you're given the choice of reducing enemies to a puddle or dousing them with paint to 'friend' them, at which point they'll begin fighting alongside you.

It's a lot to take in, and that's before you approach the rich muddle of collectables and unlockables that *Epic Mickey*'s splattered its levels with. Thankfully, Junction Point has clearly been taking pointers from other masters alongside Disney, and Nintendo is wisely invoked in both move-set and control system as spins and left-trigger targeting slot in alongside a use of Nunchuk and Remote that's all but lifted from *Mario Galaxy*.

At E3, *Epic Mickey* showed signs of being an earnest mess, a thunderingly over-thought daydream that was far too busy and cerebral to ever make for a coherent experience. As the release nears, however, while it's still unclear whether Junction Point's debut is aimed at tweens or 50-year-old animation historians, the overall experience is starting to come into focus as a generous and distinct action game. Ultimately, the finished product may be as divisive – and audacious – as Disney's own back catalogue.





Mickey's platforming and paint-squirting bring up many control issues Nintendo has already had to deal with. No wonder the controls seem so familiar, then

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRITERION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E215**

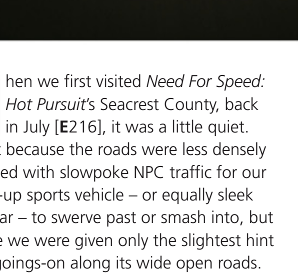
Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit

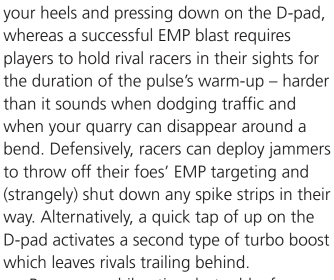
Criterion's race'n'chaser reveals a social-network-powered engine purring underneath





***Hot Pursuit* might be good-looking, but for the most part you'll be zipping by the scenery too fast to notice. One of the more exciting visual flourishes comes when you drive a cop car through a tunnel, lighting the walls blue and red**







Lonely road

Considering you'll spend most of your time in *Hot Pursuit* attempting to smash up – and being smashed up by – other vehicles on the road, the game's time trial modes (which, during the LCPD career, are dressed up as rapid response practice exercises) offer a more disciplined change of pace, sticking you in a specified car model and stripping you of all power-ups beyond the standard nitrous boost. Without fellow racers (or cops) on the road, you can't blame a densely packed roadblock of police vans for messing up your time. The LCPD time trials are even more demanding, punishing your scrapes and collisions by adding time penalties.

When we first visited *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit*'s Seacrest County, back in July [**E**216], it was a little quiet. Not just because the roads were less densely populated with slowpoke NPC traffic for our souped-up sports vehicle – or equally sleek police car – to swerve past or smash into, but because we were given only the slightest hint of the goings-on along its wide open roads. *Hot Pursuit*'s core dynamic – the racers race and the cops chase – might provide the groundwork for the bulk of the events within its split career mode, which lets you jump between the perspectives of Seacrest County's local racer population and the police department attempting to shut them down, but from that central mechanic it ekes out a number of variations and ideas.

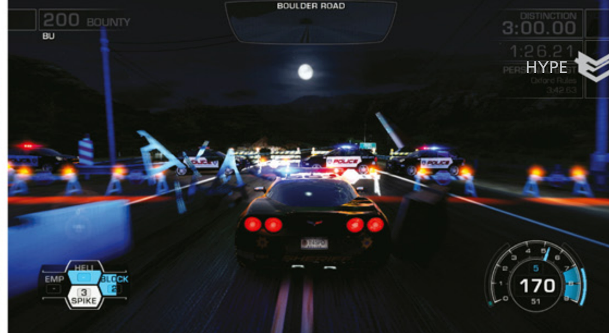
Our first gametype is a straight-up race event. And as we tear through tunnels and over mountainside passes, the sense is that this is unmistakably a Criterion game. *Burnout*'s legacy can be found in all of Seacrest's vehicles, which come equipped with a nitrous boost activated at the touch of a button. Racers recharge nitrous by driving dangerously, which means heading straight for oncoming traffic and all but trading paint with passing cars. Gliding through the slipstream of the racer in front also satisfies the nitrous bar's thirst for danger, as well it might during a race in which your opponent can drop a spike strip in your path.

> Our quarry makes a 180-degree turn and fires a radar jamming pulse. This leaves us, shorn of the map on our HUD, hopelessly speeding off in the wrong direction

Hot Pursuit's arsenal of hi-tech weaponry doesn't go quite as far as *Blur*'s forcefields and bright purple energy bolts, but still manages to lend a hint of *Mario Kart* to proceedings. Racers have access to spike strips and electromagnetic pulses, which cover them from the back and front, respectively. Dropping a spike strip is as simple as waiting until an enemy's hot on your heels and pressing down on the D-pad, whereas a successful EMP blast requires players to hold rival racers in their sights for the duration of the pulse's warm-up – harder than it sounds when dodging traffic and when your quarry can disappear around a bend. Defensively, racers can deploy jammers to throw off their foes' EMP targeting and (strangely) shut down any spike strips in their way. Alternatively, a quick tap of up on the D-pad activates a second type of turbo boost which leaves rivals trailing behind.

Races are exhilarating, but add a few cop cars into the mix and result is high-velocity carnage. Attacking both you and other racers with a demented, singular purpose, the SCPD is a force to be reckoned with, equipped with the same spike strips and EMPs as the racers, but also able to call in helicopters to drop spikes in front of the pack and organise roadblocks on the road ahead – roadblocks which racers can often avoid by taking one of the frequent shortcuts.







A successful EMP blast leads to a shower of blue sparks from within the target vehicle. Even more satisfying is when the momentary loss of control causes the target to swerve into a nearby lorry

Playing as the cops in this, the Hot Pursuit mode, offers a chance to experience life as one of *GTA*'s violently destructive peacekeepers. Cop cars refill their nitrous through driving fast and wrecking racers, which means it's possible to hurtle from the back of the pack right to the front with a few judiciously timed takedowns. One-on-one Interceptor pursuits are even more interesting, abandoning any sort of finish line and simply asking the racer to escape the cop, and the cop to stop him. The absence of a defined endpoint catches us off-guard when our quarry makes a 180-degree turn and zooms back in the direction from which we both came. As if to prove that this isn't the only trick the AI is capable of, the racer then fires a radar-jamming pulse before taking an offroad shortcut. This leaves us, shorn of the map on our HUD to tell us which direction he's gone, hopelessly speeding off in the wrong direction.

Online play will appear, of course, but more intriguing is the new 'Autolog' feature, which aims to make even the singleplayer experience a constantly networked, competitive one. Start up *Hot Pursuit*, select the 'Autolog recommends' feature on the menu, and you'll find that while you've been away the game has catalogued and stored your friends' performances, providing a rundown of times you might want to beat. Whenever you finish a race, your time is uploaded to the 'speedwall' – a leaderboard made up of your, and your friends', times. Less competitively, Autolog will recommend friends you may wish to add, and allows you and your friends to share snapshots taken in-game.

Hang on. Friend suggestions, sharing photos, walls: the language of social networking is at work here. But, unlike *Blur*, which attempted to piggyback on existing social networks, inundating your Facebook profile with auto-updates in the process, *Hot Pursuit* is turning the social network structure towards a more game-focused purpose. In a game which already looks set to provide a more than adequate arena for racing and chasing thrills in both singleplayer and online, it's *Hot Pursuit*'s ambition to blur the line between the two that could be it's most defining feature.

Hot Pursuit offers plenty of opportunities for homemade car porn. There's both the chance to take quick snapshots with a click of the right stick, or the option to take something more carefully composed



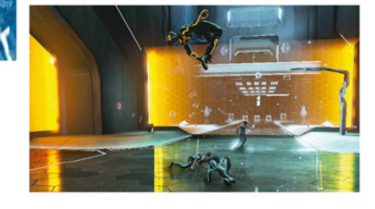
When a race begins you have to wait a few moments for your boosts and weapons to become available. By the time they do, the pack should have spread out, avoiding too much carnage too soon. Your thumb will be poised over turbo



Tron Evolution takes the popular contemporary tie-in route of telling the story between the films rather than simply restaging cinematic narratives. This can be especially handy when certain key cast members don't sign up



Parkour and combat make for a reliable, but rather safe, framework. Meanwhile, one of the inherent dangers of the licence is delivering a very blue game



Tron: Evolution

Before the legacy comes the evolution – but has Tron really learnt anything new to bring to videogames?

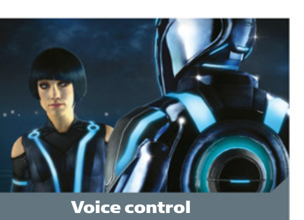
FORMATS: **360, PC, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER: **DISNEY INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **PROPAGANDA GAMES**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 1**

Tron's worlds may be built out of razor-sharp lines and artful slabs of pure neon light, but *Evolution* is constructed from far more familiar elements: parkour, acrobatic combat and the occasional piece of tightly orchestrated racing. If Disney's film series presents a stylish dream of everything videogames could be, this tie-in does a decent job of envisioning everything they often are instead.

But it's looking like slick stuff nonetheless. *Evolution*'s traversal is built from a smart range of lunges, boost jumps and wall runs that strike a good balance between accessibility and skill, while the game's combat quickly blooms from something fairly button-mashy into a handy pace-changer that requires a little more tactical knowhow. Bring up the pause menu and a surprisingly long list of combo moves spills out, ranging from various strains of disc strike to thumping area attacks that briefly pixellate the ground beneath players. And, this being 2010, there's the ever-lurking spectre of an XP system, too, allowing you to unlock new specials and finishers.

Light cycles are the third piece of the puzzle, and they've come on a long way since the game's rather gutless E3 showing. There's now a reasonable sense of speed and spectacle on offer as you power through Tron's erupting highways, dodging heavily signposted explosions that unstitch the fabric of the track around you. Equally, while the races shown so far tend to be fiercely linear and scripted to the point of becoming sheer feats of memory, they're still delivered with a glossy Hollywood imagination that manages to frame all the right elements, whether it's the misty hint of spectral spaghetti junctions floating beneath the translucent tarmac of your own highway or a fleeting glimpse of church-like spars of light poking out along the horizon.

There's been much eager talk about the unprecedented link between the realms of film and game production with *Evolution*, but the end result is likely to be testament not so much to the handling of this particular licence as to the rising standards of tie-ins we've seen this hardware generation. Fans will still find footnotes relating to the main narrative if they're so inclined, then, but everyone else will probably be swept along by the well-directed, if faintly anonymous, flow of action. *Tron: Evolution* looks to be a relatively entertaining light-ride no matter what you're after – even if it's doubtful that you'll want to spend too long trapped within this particular machine.



Voice control

Presumably one of the many fruits of *Tron: Evolution*'s close ties with the production of Tron: Legacy, Propaganda Games has secured vocal performances from almost all of the movie's cast. Cutscenes seem to be slickly directed (even if the character models are slightly lacking in detail), and the acting is far above the usual standards. The missing element, however, is a big one: Jeff Bridges didn't sign up for the videogame. Our hopes that his absence is down to a commitment to a Big Lebowski MMOG are possibly misguided.



Light cycles are an obvious big draw for fans of the franchise, but are they too difficult to get right? *Tron Evolution* certainly captures a fine sense of speed



Assassin's Creed Brotherhood

Familiar but fresh, Brotherhood's got more up its singleplayer sleeve than daggers

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 19**

"We think of this as *Assassin's Creed II… 2*," quips **Vincent Pontbriand**, *Brotherhood*'s producer, at the start of our hands-on session with the first two hours of the game. Joking aside, it's an accurate picture of what *Brotherhood* actually is. Fittingly, it picks up where Ezio's romp through *Assassin's Creed II* left off, with the Italian assassin stood in the vault of the Vatican, puzzling over the revelations he has witnessed. As he returns to his villa in Monteriggioni, Ezio recounts the events of the last game in a smart dialogue with his uncle Mario in a scene with all the production polish of its predecessor. It's a natural way to recap for series fans, but newcomers will be left – much like the lead character himself – wondering quite what they've stumbled upon; the plot of *Assassin's Creed II*, as related by a 15th-century Italian noble, sounds ludicrous to the uninitiated.

Settled back into Ezio's family home, a series of fetch-and-carry missions introduce players to the controls, taking the same tutorial tack as *ACII*. They immediately capture the playful spirit of the series – you find and chastise a lazy cannon engineer, and lug a box of flowers for an agreeably flirtatious girl. Predictably, Ezio's peace is short-lived as Monteriggioni comes under attack from the Borgia family. The assault destroys the town, and onscreen prompts explain how much value your villa has lost – a neat touch that tugs on the heartstrings of *ACII* devotees who spent hours collecting art and renovating their hub. With his home in ruins and his uncle dead, Ezio vows revenge, setting the stage for a return to Rome.

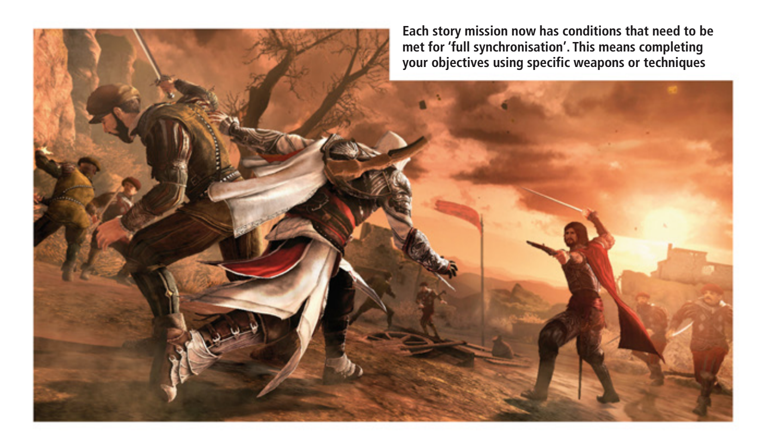
It's at this point the game reintroduces us to the 'real-world' story of Desmond and Lucy, as they arrive at the ruined Villa Auditore in contemporary Monteriggioni. Fears that the hokey 'out of Animus' gameplay of the past would return are dampened as the pair infiltrate the villa's crypt via the sewer tunnels in an intuitive platforming segment, enlivened by witty dialogue. Once inside, Desmond and his crew set up their guerrilla Animus and we're thrust back to Rome, inside the cape of Ezio. It's a detour that breaks the pace better than some of the banal sections of *ACII*, and shows that, rather than retreading old ground, Ubisoft Montreal is working to improve its footing with *Brotherhood*.

From this point onwards, it's business as usual – albeit with a bundle of subtle tweaks. The biggest new additions are Borgia Towers, which you need to burn down to liberate areas of the city, adding a sense of scale to your actions. Killing the captain and razing a tower allows you to buy property in the liberated zone, bringing in cash. It's the economy system from *ACII* applied to the entirety of Rome, then, and it's a welcome innovation that subtly changes the rhythm of the game. Layered on top of the new structure are flashbacks to Ezio's youth, more glyphs to hunt, war machines to test for Leonardo, and much more that we don't have time to explore. Add to this the extensive multiplayer and it amounts to a game that's more than an intermission.

Many have questioned the quality and necessity of *Brotherhood*, coming so soon after *Assassin's Creed II* last year. These fears appear misplaced: this is a fully realised, carefully crafted sequel (to a sequel) aimed at delighting fans of the previous game without spoiling their appetites for the trilogy's finale.



The captain of each Borgia tower needs to be dispatched before the structure can be burned. They will either stand and fight or will flee, prompting a chase minigame



Each story mission now has conditions that need to be met for 'full synchronisation'. This means completing your objectives using specific weapons or techniques

Why Brotherhood?

As the name implies, Ezio forms a brotherhood of assassins to help him wrest control of Italy's capital from the Borgia family, and this gives you two important gameplay additions. The first is support. At any point you can highlight an enemy, tap LB, and have a pair of acolytes perform an assassination on the target. They'll stick around and fight beside you before disappearing. Second, the brotherhood opens up a micromanagement minigame similar to that in *Peace Walker*. Approach a pigeon coop and you're transported to a screen that allows you to send recruited troops off on missions across Europe. Each successful venture earns the assassin XP, which can be used to level up his/her skills, and lands Ezio a purseful of Florins.





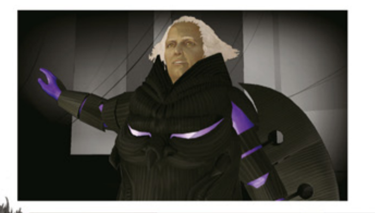
Combat is fluid and fast, but at this early stage of the game (above) can lack challenge. The weapon-styling mechanic implies depth later on, however. The more traditional arena of the side-scrolling platformer really allows the team's wilder visual ideas to come to life

El Shaddai: Ascension Of The Metatron

How style adds substance to Ignition's heretical adventure

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UTV IGNITION**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2011**

Despite a heretically gamey take on an ancient text, *El Shaddai* developer UTV Ignition seems less willing to defy the tenets of a less dusty but equally sacred tome – that of videogame design. Visually, it unloads retina-searing shock and awe at a migraine-inducing pace, but it meekly treads a line previously set down by the likes of *Devil May Cry*. The result, on the basis of our Tokyo Game Show playtest, is a surprisingly unsurprising experience. But, for all that, *El Shaddai* still makes an impression.



With former Clover art director Sawaki Takeyasu helming the project, it's perhaps no great shock that the game occasionally feels like one driven by its visuals. The combat is spectacular to witness, but easy to execute. It's built around lead character Enoch's ability to seize his enemies' weapons, but it's the presentation that makes it feel rewarding. Snatching a pair of gauntlets from a golem, we cut away to a brief cinematic as our angel-in-waiting sanitises the crude bludgeons, transforming them into sleek wrist-mounted adornments. Their power is immediately implied, and the resulting violence is made all the more satisfying as enemies visibly degrade with each successful strike.

Later scenes see our hero traversing 2D environments of staggering beauty. The first plays out against a background of vibrant stained glass that hints at the density of the game's plot far better than the snippy voiceover from Enoch's ally Lucifel (a pre-horns Lucifer). The scene that follows is better still. We deftly double jump over a series of tumbling platforms as great foaming waves rise from below, carrying us over expansive chasms. More striking still are the hallucinatory flashes, smears and blurs of colour that turn the scene into as vibrant a visual landscape as this generation of console hardware has seen.

The demo concludes with a meeting with Lucifel, dapper in a trim suit and clutching an incongruous transparent umbrella. Any hints at the developing plot, however, are cut short by a boss encounter. Barrelling in amid plumes of lightning and thunderous chords, two armoured beasts crying blood enter the scene. It's yet another unforgettable visual image, but one that also suggests that the aforementioned combat system is about to be put to the test. Sadly, it's where our demo ends.

As prophetic as the game's awkward title is, questions still surround *El Shaddai*. Stylistically it certainly pushes boundaries, but will that artistic sense of experimentation extend to or satisfyingly augment the gameplay? The early playthrough suggests promise, but with this one UTV Ignition has much to prove before it can ascend to greatness.



The character design recalls in its exuberance director Sawaki Takeyasu's glories as art director on *Devil May Cry* and *Okami*. Enemy weapons can be stolen after a little softening up, and each new acquisition is preceded by a short cinematic as Enoch purifies his new plaything

The clothes show

The game's emphasis on style extends beyond its smart visual flair. Beneath Enoch's armour he wears jeans by real-life brand Edwin (gifted to him by time-hopping ally Lucifel). This market crossover recalls *Devil May Cry 3*, in which Dante squeezed into some Diesel duds. Japanese punters will be able to buy their own *El Shaddai*-styled jeans closer to the game's launch; a similar western opportunity to accessorise like an archangel has yet to be announced.



The other characters Enoch encounters will also be taken from the Book Of Enoch, an ancient Jewish text allegedly written by Noah's great grandfather. The pearlescent effects used to convey *El Shaddai*'s otherworldly lands are striking, but those playable lacked space suggestive of the possibility of exploration



The flying drones are fragile, but can highlight enemy units and provide a valuable line of sight for tactical players. Your purchase options will depend on choice of loadout, which will be fully customisable

From look speed to button layout, from sprints to reload timings, the control scheme will be familiar to anyone who's played *Modern Warfare 2*. Kaos is hoping to make any transitions as frustration-free as possible

Homefront

Kaos returns with a new multiplayer offering. But is it more controlled this time around?

In any other online battlefield, a Humvee packed with two teammates would be irresistible. And there they are, slowing down, parking up and offering a free seat. But this spawn, we've got more ambitious plans. A few moments ago we saw a Johnny Five-esque drone trundle past a church before pausing, taking aim and unleashing two chainguns. We want one.

Fortunately, Kaos Studios' *Homefront* makes it easy. Instead of wandering the multiplayer maps for static emplacements or waiting for a timed spawn, we sprint away from battle, vault a fence and lie flat. Once we're safe from stray bullets, it takes only two button presses and we've spent 300 of *Homefront*'s Battle Points on our own drone. It's instantly deployed and controlled remotely. As matches go on, points get spent and the rewards get greater until everyone's fighting in a heavy-duty futuristic warzone. Of course, you'll be using them to upgrade your loadouts post-match, too.

This might sound familiar if you played Kaos' first game, *Frontlines: Fuel Of War*. *Homefront*'s senior game designer, **Brian Holinka**, blames over-ambition for the first game's mediocre reviews: "You aim for the moon and hope to hit space, right?" But *Frontlines* never really left the shelves. This time, the team is relying more on reinvention than innovation, hoping to combine the spectacle of a vehicle-heavy battleground with the immediacy of infantry-focused twitch. "If we get mentioned on a par with *Battlefield: BC2* or *Call Of Duty* then we'll definitely be pleased. It's tough to compete in that space. I remember reading a forum post by people who were upset that *Battlefield* wasn't just *COD* with vehicles. I feel we're close to that."

Johnny Five's tour is short but valuable. Patrolling the street, we manage four kills before a cunning enemy cashes in his Battle Points for rocket-launcher ammo and lets rip. With easy access to powerful weaponry and vehicles, there's a risk that matches could end up dominated by the elite, or wars of attrition full of pyrotechnics but lacking the satisfaction of tactical play. Holinka reassures us: "It does get vicious really quick. You see that with *COD*'s Killstreaks too. But in *Homefront*, when you buy a powerful vehicle you're introducing currency into the economy. The guy who manages to take down an attack chopper with a rocket launcher gets enough points to buy his own. It naturally balances itself out."

With 32-player battles, a unique setting (see 'Hold your ground') and the opportunity to explore inventive tech, *Homefront*'s multiplayer is enticing. If Kaos handles this just right, it could leave orbit.

Battle Points build up over multiple spawns, allowing anyone an opportunity to harness the power of expensive vehicles if they save for long enough. With 32 players supported in the larger modes, and team-based objectives clearly highlighted, recruits will struggle not to rack up a few points, no matter how green





The build we played was pre-alpha, but *Homefront*'s maps feel varied enough to support the range of possible play styles while retaining a realistic aesthetic. Whether they'll end up polished enough to take on the current genre leaders' technical muscle is yet to be seen

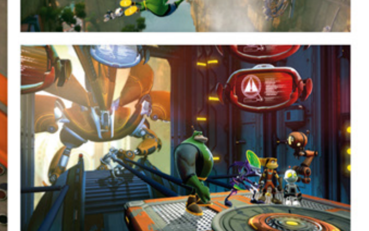
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **KAOS STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 18**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E218**



Hold your ground

After Kim Jong-Il's death and his son's succession, North Korea becomes aggressive, first annexing South Korea and its immediate neighbours, then turning to and conquering North America. And that's where you come in. *Homefront*'s future fiction provides an opportunity for some innovative battlegrounds, where guerrilla American forces are forced to defend their home soil from invasion. We played two maps, one set in a bombed-out suburban neighbourhood, and another on deserted farmland. Regardless of the game mode, the opposition is never more than a few seconds away from your crosshairs.





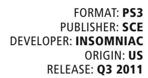


As you bash boxes and baddies, the nuts and bolts everyone loves flow into the characters responsible. Narcotic thrill or distracting junk? Whatever, they're still here

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **INSOMNIAC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q3 2011**

Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One

Insomniac revamps its flagship platformer with four protagonists, drop-in co-op and a dose of txtspk



Insomnambulist

Insomniac Games has developed exclusively for Sony consoles in the past, and *Resistance* and *Ratchet & Clank* will almost certainly remain PlayStation exclusive. But the studio's an independent, and a deal with EA Partners was announced back in May for a new IP that we'd bet is multiplatform. The more interesting aspect of the announcement, and something re-emphasised by company founder Ted Price at Gamescom recently, is a change to the studio's development cycles, which are moving from two to three years. It's a move that can only benefit the already high quality of its games, and shows a studio defiant in the face of much belt-tightening elsewhere.

The colourful universe of Ratchet and Clank, with their arsenal of exotic gadgetry, is the dark horse among Sony's firstparty exclusives. In the eight years since its PS2 debut there have been eight games, not a duffer among them (OK, so High Impact's *Secret Agent Clank* wasn't particularly stellar), adding up to many millions of sales.

All 4 One is self-explanatory: it's the series' first co-op-focused entry. Ratchet and Clank are joined by Qwark and Nefarious to make a foursome; players can drop in or out during a session, and the team can be any combination of local and online adventurers. To some, it may seem strange to see former enemies from the series working alongside each other, but this isn't really the sort of IP to ponder such issues in depth.

The game plays as you'd expect. The *R&C* formula certainly provides good foundations for knockabout pratfalls, and the level we saw was full of new co-op-activated tricks, such as ropes that support multiple hangers-on, platforms depending on synchronised jumping, and enemies which have to be exposed by one half while the other lets rip with the howitzer (solo players will be accompanied by AI bots).

The key tools seem to be the Vacuum-4000 – a gun that can suck in things, including other players, and spit them out – and the swingshot, a rope that pulls characters together. Firing others across gaps with the first is easy enough, and pulling them back with the latter so that they fall is just as simple. Characters can connect to each other with the swingshot in mid-air, so negotiating gaps with four of you connected by threads takes a bit of momentum and plenty of teamwork.

The weapons in general are built to work together, with the example on show a pair of guns that fire a beam between them: stretch it out and run up either side of a big group of enemies and they're vaporised. When a bigger robot turns up, players have to fire each other on to pads to knock down its shields before ganging up to focus their fire when it's vulnerable.

Needless to say when it comes to an Insomniac production, everything looks positively scrumptious. There's even more of a cartoon edge to the characters in this outing, and the busyness and size of the environments (linear though they are) seems to dwarf the sizeable *Future* games. Ultimately there may be nothing to change the world here, but it looks like it'll be a lot of fun saving it.

If you haven't yet seen *All 4 One*'s trailer, look it up, if only for President Qwark's opening line, a reference that cheekily sums up the series' assured sense of humour



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **SUCKER PUNCH**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBC 2011**

Infamous 2

Sucker Punch turns up the voltage for its superhero sequel





Grindable surfaces glow bright white, which makes them easy to pick out in the busy streets. The addition of vertical and horizontal power lines makes navigation a faster experience

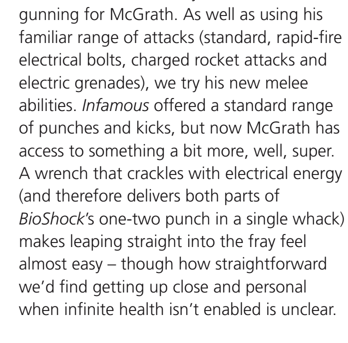
What do you remember most about *Infamous*? Chances are, it's not Empire City, the rust-coloured New York-alike that was hero Cole McGrath's uninspiring home. The good news, then, is that Sucker Punch has left behind that particular ash-toned concrete sprawl and looked south for inspiration for its sequel's setting of New Marais, a city based on real-life New Orleans.

"One thing we're focused on," says designer **Darren Bridges**, "is making each district feel unique. New Marais provides a nice way to do that. In this kind of city there's a lot of very different areas."

We're dropped into what appears to be a park or private estate. A couple of old and impressive-looking buildings, with expansive – and, we're told, fully destructible – verandahs can be seen in the distance. The palette recalls the tones of 2009's game, but it's quickly apparent that the southern setting has allowed Sucker Punch to craft an environment that's rather more interesting than Empire City's concrete blocks. The area we appear in has more than a whiff of the bayou about it.



The impossibility of predicting the carnage caused by McGrath's tornado is part of the appeal – you'll fire it off at a row of parked cars just to see where they end up

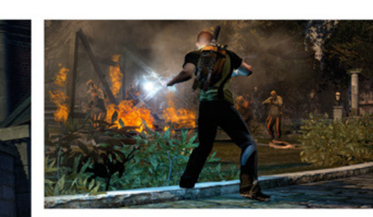


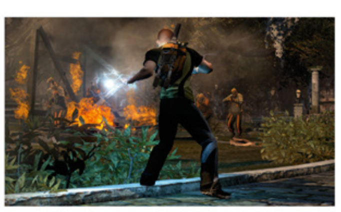
Not that we've much time to appreciate the view, as a small army of militia men are gunning for McGrath. As well as using his familiar range of attacks (standard, rapid-fire electrical bolts, charged rocket attacks and electric grenades), we try his new melee abilities. *Infamous* offered a standard range of punches and kicks, but now McGrath has access to something a bit more, well, super. A wrench that crackles with electrical energy (and therefore delivers both parts of *BioShock*'s one-two punch in a single whack) makes leaping straight into the fray feel almost easy – though how straightforward we'd find getting up close and personal when infinite health isn't enabled is unclear.

After tearing through the infantry, we come face to face with something a bit more challenging: a ravager – a stumping, charging, skinless beast with tree trunks for legs and a healthy resistance to McGrath's electrical rockets. "*Infamous* was an origin story," says Bridges. "Cole starts out as a regular guy and at the end he's really powerful. In *Infamous 2*, Cole starts as a superhero. So how do we amp it up? By increasing the enemy variety and strength. Cole will take out a militia guy no problem, but if you face one of the bigger creatures you've got to use everything you've got."

The next part of the demo sees us chasing a limousine through the palm-tree-lined streets of New Marais, and gives us a chance to see how McGrath's parkour skills have been upgraded too, as we leap from rooftop to rooftop in pursuit. "In the first game we had the grind wires between buildings," says Bridges. "Now there are vertical grind poles, and high-voltage lines on the sides of buildings which you can slide along. We're trying to integrate the electricity superpowers into the parkour."

The chase ends with us taking out a chopper with one of McGrath's new abilities – an electrical tornado that picks up cars and rips the facades off buildings as it hurtles towards its target. It's a terrific reminder that, for all the first game's frustrations, it understood that the key to a superhero game is giving players a sense of unrivalled power. And, on that front, *Infamous 2* seems unlikely to disappoint.





McGrath tears through enemies with impressive melee animations. Militia have little defence when you get up close, and the combat feels simple



A shocking makeover

The limousine section we played was previously shown in *Infamous 2*'s E3 trailer. But when he appeared then – and to the upset of the first game's fans – McGrath was a photogenic hero with a mop of stylishly tousled hair. Now McGrath's reverted to his bald, scowling self, we ask Bridges if Sucker Punch was prepared for the response. "We were really surprised! With our approach to *Infamous 2* we were trying to say 'no stone unturned'. The character design had to change because there was a new city, a warmer climate – so, no jacket – and he was going to have the new weapon on his back. So we said, 'Let's really go for it'. Then the fans said, 'Hey, where's Cole?' We never like to get bad feedback, but it's positive that they were so attached."


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FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2011**

Gun Loco

Square Enix's nutso shooter puts the fun back into run-and-gun

The world of *Gun Loco* is one populated by bunny-headed psychopaths, briefs-wearing madmen and various other escapees from the wacky character leftover pile. It's an art style that's both provocative and reminiscent of a bygone age that was less in thrall to Hollywood and more interested in exuberance. But it isn't just the visuals that are in your face: gameplay-wise, this feels like an attempt to write the cover mechanic out of run-and-gun history.

The result is a game whose premise can feel dated or, worse, simplistic almost to the point of idiocy. You run, you gun – that's pretty much it. That it works is thanks largely to a smash-and-grab approach that sees its anti-heroes borrowing mechanics left, right and centre. Holding the right shoulder button, for instance, initiates a sprint that simultaneously highlights traversable obstacles, *Mirror's Edge* style. Score several slick kills in quick succession and points are heaped on, recalling *The Club*.

Square Enix even has the gall to take elements from games yet to be released. That aforementioned shoulder button, for instance, enables a movement system similar to that of *Brink*; combine this with gunplay and your character pulls off a slow-mo slide reminiscent of those performed by *Vanquish*'s leading man.

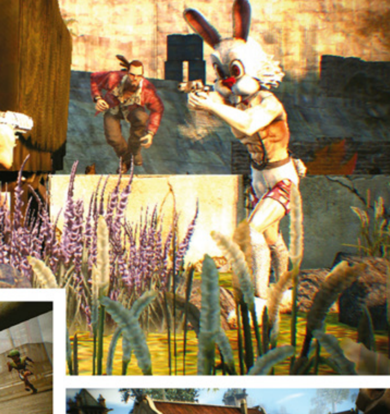
Inevitably, *Gun Loco* is a game that felt right at home among the oddities on display at TGS. But while *Gears Of War 3*, *Vanquish* and their like wow us with slick production and slicker mechanics, *Gun Loco* seems content to trade entirely in good old-fashioned fun. It's a tactic that may yet pay off.





Holding the shoulder button not only initiates a dash but up close it triggers one of a number of outrageous kill moves (above left) that are dependent on your position relative to the enemy







In the demo we played, our squadmates were AI-controlled, but it's already clear that this will be a game best played in multiplayer co-op mode

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **MISTWALKER**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2011**

The Last Story

The first details of Mistwalker's ambitious Final Fantasy rival come to light

With *The Last Story*, it seems that Mistwalker is finally ready to embrace the extravagance it rejected with the defiant traditionalism of *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey*. The beautiful yet inscrutable concept art we've been teased with for months now has lifted to reveal a game as seemingly overwhelming as any recent *Final Fantasy*, but just as difficult to explain without the aid of a laser pointer and overhead projector.

While the story, last or otherwise, seems fairly predictable thus far – the hero is an orphaned mercenary named Elza, pitted against the brunt of an evil empire for as-yet-unrevealed reasons – the game's battle system offers an intriguing combination of turn-based, realtime and even thirdperson-shooter elements.

The *Final Fantasy XII* influence is clear not only in the game's (relatively) muted art style, but also in the targeting lines that emerge from enemies' chests. Although presumably handy for tactical reasons, these will come into their own within the game's Gathering system, which allows Elza to divert enemy attention and give his AI party members the sneaky upper hand. If it sounds weirdly similar to *Army Of Two*'s Aggro system, well, that was our impression of it, too.

More overt shooter elements lie in the game's Focus mechanic, which is a fancy way of saying Elza can snipe distant enemies with his crossbow. He can also detect weaknesses, both in bad guys and in buildings, happily meaning that you can topple bridges on to enemy heads.

Since the N64 days, Nintendo's consoles have hardly been fertile ground for JRPGs. We're doubtful whether *The Last Story* will have the power to turn such a tide, but it's reassuring that at least Mistwalker appears to be giving it its all.



As in *Final Fantasy XII*, you're made aware of enemy intentions thanks to the colourful puppet-lines that connect attacker to victim. Things could look messy in that game; let's hope you can turn them off here





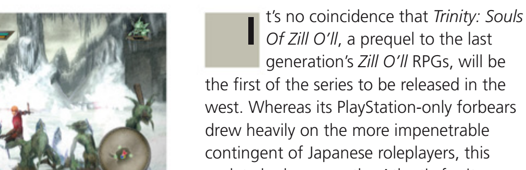
The game is hardly the first to feature a cover system, but it's a surprising addition for a JRPG. Taking cover doesn't appear to be a requirement, however, since melee appears to form the bulk of the game's combat


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FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO KOEI**
DEVELOPER: **OMEGA FORCE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2011**

Trinity: Souls Of Zill O'll

East heads west in style in Omega Force's action-RPG









The unusual art style gives the action the feel of a living oil painting and simultaneously lets the game stand out amid the crowded action-RPG pack, although some of its enemy design hardly feels original

It's no coincidence that *Trinity: Souls Of Zill O'll*, a prequel to the last generation's *Zill O'll* RPGs, will be the first of the series to be released in the west. Whereas its PlayStation-only forbears drew heavily on the more impenetrable contingent of Japanese roleplayers, this update looks across the Atlantic for its inspirations. Dynamic, quest-led storytelling and turn-based combat are out, and a more structured (if linear) plot and realtime hacking and slashing are in, and on this basis the game is already in fine fettle.

Players take on the role of a trio of heroes – each with distinct abilities beyond their shared melee attacks. Aeleus, for instance, is adept at wielding magic, occasionally freezing entire lakes and any enemies unfortunate to find themselves within range. Bulky Dagusa, meanwhile, can heft great chunks of masonry out of the ground and into the face of anything standing nearby, while sultry vampire Selene is equipped with a double jump allowing greater exploration. It's a familiar concept, but it works well when taking on vast legions of creatures – only switching to a character trapped in an attack animation can interrupt the flow.



Similarly, the game's visuals are keen to pay homage to the west. The graphical style tips a nod to a past more distant still by rendering its backgrounds as living oils, and the clearly visible fibres of the canvas make for a particularly striking touch. Combined with painterly character models it emerges as a convincing way to render a fantasy world.

It seems unlikely that the final game can compete with the likes of *Oblivion*, but nonetheless it represents an interesting design U-turn that may yet find fans at home and abroad.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **FEELPLUS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JANUARY**

Mind Jack

All in the mind? Feelplus' ambitious shooter needs to focus



***Mind Jack*'s take on class-based shooting sees you hop from one character type to the next. Disappointingly, there's an imbalance between the humanoids and their more colourful squadmates**

Be it carefully designed preloaded heroes or avatars customised to the nth degree to resemble minor celebrities, multiplayer games trade heavily on character personality – or, more accurately, the player's ability to engage with their avatars. *Mind Jack*, on the other hand, seems content to pursue its high-concept idea at the expense of an engaging lead. Or a single one, at least.

Players take on the role of nebulous clouds of consciousness that can hijack the bodies of various bots that themselves fulfil various action-game archetypes. The resulting melee sees semi-naked muscle men, insipidly pretty hostesses and cybernetically enhanced apes enter the fray. It's a bold step, but the risk doesn't quite pay off during our recent TGS play session. Each hacked individual is easily cast off, if only to test out the next oddity's combat chops. More disappointingly still, only the humanoid characters feel versatile enough to stick with for any length of time.

Lack of real choice aside, the central concept remains engaging as teams of human players swell their ranks by 'mind hacking' NPCs to create combat drones. Again, it's an intriguing mechanic, but one that sheds light on still more flaws. The result is a subdued affair in which players hang back behind cover and let their puppets exchange blows. It's entertaining to see these bots' rudimentary AI taken to its logical and violent conclusion, but it can also mean that there's a lack of similar interaction between players.



It may be consistent for 'mind-hacked' drones to behave with rudimentary intelligence but it does, ironically, reduce some skirmishes to mindless shooting galleries

Still, despite nagging technical doubts, there's a sense that, with polish, such a system could lend an otherwise deceptively ordinary multiplayer game an extraordinary tactical depth. More intriguing again are the opportunities such ideas could bring to a well-constructed singleplayer campaign. Given work, Feelplus may yet capture the imagination of its audience as well as the minds of its characters.



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FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JANUARY 27**

Valkyria Chronicles 3

Sega offers up a second portable dose of pastel-coloured warfare

Fans of *Valkyria Chronicles* hoping for a console sequel to 2008's underappreciated strategy game will find themselves disappointed again, as the series, redeployed to handheld for this year's *Valkyria Chronicles 2*, looks set to dig in there. *VC2*'s move to PSP was not without compromises, the most obvious – and inevitable – of which came in the form of duller, muted visuals, but which also included broken-up level design. How *VC3* builds on its predecessors' nonetheless solid foundations to make a game which plays to strengths of the turn-based strategy series' new home will be crucial.

The slightly cutesy boarding school setting of *VC2* has been dropped. Instead, *VC3* is returning to the war of the first game, and giving players a chance to view that conflict not through the eyes of a bunch of idealistic school kids but from the vantage point of the Nameless, a penal unit made up of deserters and criminals. The Nameless will be sent on deniable, high-risk missions in the hope of reclaiming their honour.

A spec ops vibe, then, but more important changes include a graphical upgrade to the previous game's engine as well as a re-jig of the structure. Instead of picking your next engagement from a list, the game will take you on a more linear journey from one story mission to the next, with the aim being to create a tighter, better paced experience.

Tank warfare has also been given a bigger role, with the points penalty for moving a tank on the field slashed in half. And with the player's squad of soldiers reduced in size, more attention will have to be given to the team members who *are* at your disposal, a shift that should naturally lead to more focused play. More fundamental changes seem unlikely, but what's been shown indicates a series polishing its guns for the next assault.



The PSP tech is unable to do justice to the first *Valkyria Chronicles*' storybook aesthetic, but improvements to the engine are already clear, and a step up from *VC2*





While the full details of *Valkyria Chronicles 3*'s plot are unclear, Sega has confirmed that the story of the Nameless will intersect with that of the original game

Zettai Zetsumei Toshi 4: Summer Memories

Don't look down and keep it clean in Irem's disaster series' PS3 debut

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **IREM STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

Eight years on from the release of the first game, the concept at the heart of the *Zettai Zetsumei Toshi* series (known by a variety of names, most notably *Disaster Report*, in the west) still feels novel. The player, one of a handful of survivors of a major disaster, must escape a slowly crumbling city, encountering and aiding other survivors along the way. After *Zettai Zetsumei Toshi 3* moved to PSP in order to offer a compact, personal experience, *Summer Memories* sees the series returning to console, and utilising the technological opportunities afforded by both Move and 3D to bring its setting and mechanics to life.

Featuring a completely customisable player character, the city of *Summer Memories* is larger and more detailed than any seen before in the series. Rather than having been upgraded purely cosmetically, buildings will now have fully detailed interiors, with players required to negotiate ravaged structures from both inside and out in order to reach higher ground, and the survivors sheltering about the city.

Always a series happy to burden characters with the demands of the human body – asking them to watch a slowly depleting hydration gauge, for instance – *Summer Memories* adds going to the toilet and treating wounds to the list of needs which must juggled. Left untreated, wounds can make walking difficult, leading to missed objectives and lost time. Players must also mind how 'clean' the character feels – a dirty, dust-covered survivor's stress levels will steadily increase. As in *Zettai Zetsumei Toshi 3*, meeting fellow survivors will lead to conversation trees and choices, as you decided whether or not to give them aid.

With its TGS appearance marred by failing code, how the game's Move integration will work is unclear, though the potential for 3D technology to imbue the game's sheer drops and precarious rooftop journeys with a vertigo-inducing sense of depth was made clear in rolling demos. A structural reinvention of the concept may be unlikely, but *Summer Memories* looks set to fall apart better than any entry in the series to date.





For a game in which your character worries about getting dirty, there's something a bit pristine looking about the *Summer Memories* streets revealed so far



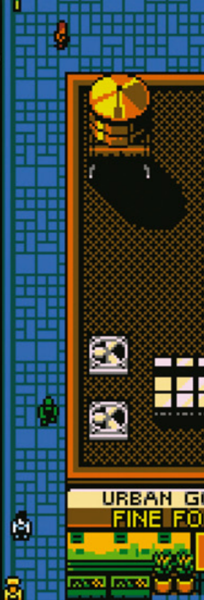
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RAMPAGE



Faster than a receding mullet, Retro City Rampage is mining your memories and painting them on the small screen in all their 8bit glory







Many videogame devotees aspire to be designers, programmers, artists or creators. Canada native and founder of Vblank Entertainment **Brian Provinciano** has made all of those roles a full-time, homebrew reality for the past year. Giving up his day job in the industry – working on everything from emulators of old Midway, Namco and Capcom games for home consoles, to PSP *Sonic Rivals* titles – Provinciano has been focusing his efforts on a passion project that has its roots in his days as a young gamer. "My inspiration came from playing games and, if I really liked them, dropping the controller and trying to do my own version, like trying to draw my own *Sonic* levels in MS Paint," he explains.

In the late '90s, Provinciano's inspiration was DMA Design's *Grand Theft Auto* series. The top-down crime sim was an irresistible template for the wannabe designer, and he set about whipping up his own mix of 8bit urban chaos: *Grandtheftendo*. "I wanted to see if I could get a *GTA*-type game on the NES," says the 25-year-old matter-of-factly. It was, naturally, no mean feat, and the limitations of the hardware soon got in the way of any good intentions. "I just wanted to make a really fun game and some of the



TITLE: **RETRO CITY RAMPAGE**
FORMAT: **PC, WII**
PUBLISHER: **VBLANK ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **2011**










Shootouts are around every corner, and the slightest error – or civilian casualty – can result in a battle with the police



limitations were hindering that. For example, I was only able to have one car graphic onscreen [with the NES hardware].” Fast-forward almost a decade and Provinciano's dream is still alive, albeit with more capable hardware at his disposal and entitled *Retro City Rampage*. “To make it a commercial project at some point and have it reach the masses, I needed an original game to bring to modern hardware,” he explains. Having dabbled with inserting a few choice locations from gaming's past into his 8bit-inspired playground, Provinciano expanded the idea to have users carry out missions for parodies of Guybrush Threepwood and Leisure Suit Larry. From here, the idea snowballed all the way to the present day, where *RCR* is now populated entirely by cult characters. “It was around early 1998 when it transitioned to be really zany and comical. I was working on jump collision, deciding what to do when one character's on top of another. It dawned on me: why doesn't he squash them like in *Super Mario*? From that point I started getting crazy… I worked on it part-time while I was in the industry. Over a year ago I finally took the leap and went into it full-time. I took on an additional pixel artist, but even since then I've done 95 per cent of the art. I also got three musicians, one of whom does SFX as well.”



Brian Provinciano
Founder, Vblank Entertainment

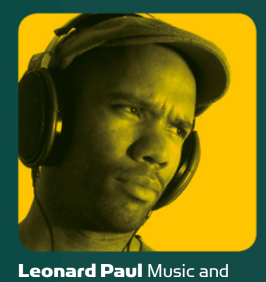
“I take the limitations of the NES, the graphics and audio capabilities, but I'm focusing on making RCR as intuitive as modern games”

It's not just a nostalgic playground of stolen ideas – *RCR* is a polished, addictive and unique experience on its own merits. Our experience with a near-complete build plants us in the beautifully blocky world of Theftropolis following a title screen (complete with crackling chiptune soundtrack) furnished with Miami Vice-era pink and blue. Visually, it's authentic without being revisionist – there are no correctives in *RCR*'s style: it's homage to the extent of imitation. Mechanically, however, the intention is very much to teach an old dog new tricks. “I've done a lot of work to make these games more accessible,” Provinciano explains. “I take the limitations of the [NES] hardware, the graphics and audio capabilities, but I'm focusing [on making] it as intuitive as modern games, with tutorials and hints as to what you're supposed to do. Not just throwing users in and assuming they read a big manual on the game.”

The first concession to user-friendliness is the pop-up prompt to toggle the steering controls. The next – and most striking – is the cover mechanic which, as Provinciano extols, is “something even *Chinatown Wars* doesn't have.” In the heat of battle, a simple button-press sticks your sprite to the nearest wall, ducking from fire and allowing pop-up-and-shoot gunplay. It'll also lower your wanted meter if you find the right nook. It's a deft innovation, mixing the old and new. Fleeing the fuzz is a regular demand of *RCR* (an accidentally squished pedestrian sends the over-vigilant cops into high alert, charging you down until you're a pixel corpse), but it's the mission design rather than the free-roaming that really delivers the knock-off goods.

None of the fixed missions of the main story repeat themselves, each peppered with more outlandish cap-doffing to the old-school – from a *Bionic Commando* grapple-armed foe to an infiltration mission straight out of the original *Metal Gear*. It's not just an obsession with classic games that has informed Theftropolis: it's a mosaic of pop culture, from the opening Dark Knight bank heist (swapping out the Joker for the Jester) to the attempts of Mutant Ninja Turtles and A-Team lookalikes to foil your getaway plans. It sounds like copyright infringement suicide, but Provinciano is adamant that the precedent for such

MUSIC MEN The team behind RCR's authentic 8bit audio



Leonard Paul Music and sound effects composer

“I created all the sound effects found in *Retro City Rampage*. Nearly all the sounds are made using just the synthesis voices of the NES: two pulse waves, a triangle wave and a noise channel. The DPCM – or sampled sound channel – is used primarily for human voices such as the ‘hey!’ exclamation when the cops start pursuing you. I had great fun making music using the same NES-style in the genres of dub, house, synth pop and more for the game's various missions and radio stations under my music moniker ‘Freaky DNA’.”



Matt Creamer
Music composer

“In a lot of ways, *Retro City Rampage* embodies everything I enjoy about making chip-tune music. I love trying to take modern music, whether it be metal or jazz or rock or whatever, and creating it as accurately as I can in an 8bit form. I don't really care to make my music sound exactly like the music on the NES. I want to create the ideas I have, and use the 8bit limitations as my medium for expression. It's almost like saying, ‘If the NES were still making games, what would the music sound like on it now?’”



Jake ‘Virt’ Kaufman
Music composer

“Upon learning of this project years ago, I immediately wrote a love-letter to Brian and begged him to let me contribute some tracks. And, well, here we are. All you chipheads out there: I want you – yes, you – to search the web for Famitracker, download it, survive the learning curve and write some NES music of your very own. Suck it up! You can totally do it! Put it online and send me links. It doesn't have to be good, just do it. That is your assignment. Are you a bad enough dude or dudette?”



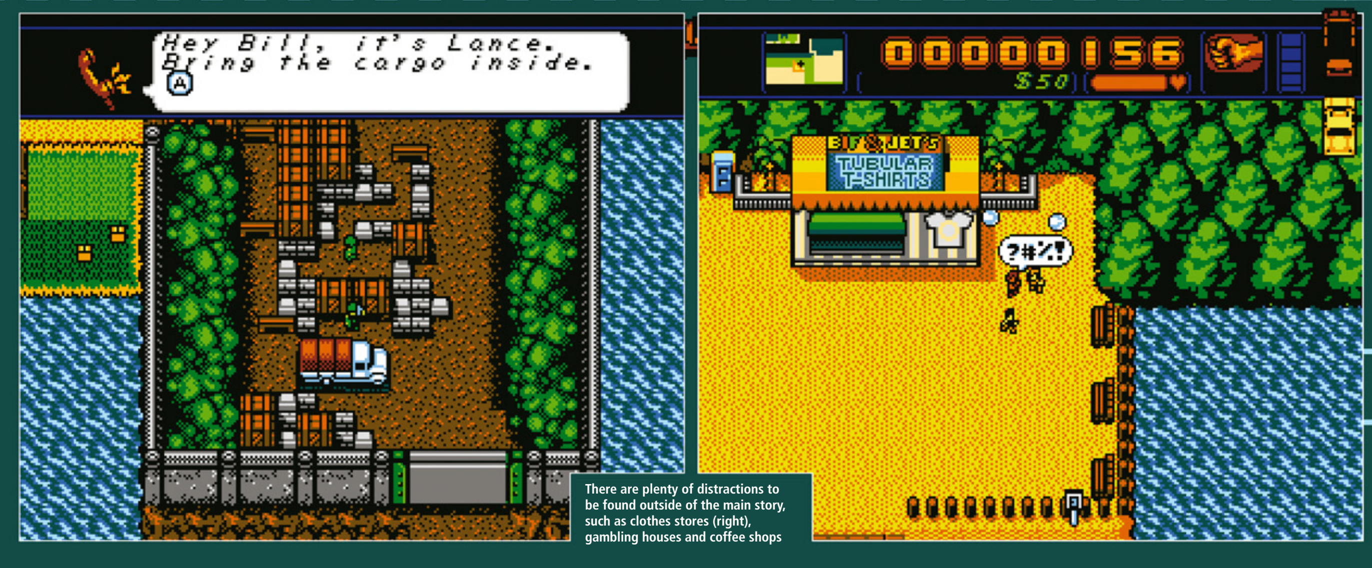


Every area of the city is like a miniature postcard from gaming history. From *Mario World* (above) to various old Ocean games (think *Platoon*, *Rambo*), its influences run the full spectrum









There are plenty of distractions to be found outside of the main story, such as clothes stores (right), gambling houses and coffee shops

good-spirited cameos was set by bigger studios than his one-man band. "The good news is that now games have come out like *3D Dot Game Heroes* and *Scott Pilgrim*; these games all parody other games, and some more blatantly than mine, so I'm not too worried any more. I'm just trying to make sure that they're de-branded enough." Provinciano's confidence is buffed by the recent cultural movement of revisiting old games: "The demake culture is neat. It spawns from the fact that it's easier to do these simple graphics – especially as a one-man team. *Mega Man 9* and *Dark Void Zero* are good examples – it's good that they've both been successful and prove the market is there."

A couple of the standout minigames we sample are shots in the arm for retro-maniacs, some requiring dexterity and all requiring a sense of humour. Powering a DeLorean to 88mph by running down pedestrians is one of the more fiendish challenges. Another involves a band of ghost busters begging you to exorcise their hijacked, haunted work van. The solution: pick up the bodies of the recently deceased and hurl them into the speeding, possessed vehicle.

Did we mention that *RCR* is set to make its debut on WiiWare? It may be on sale side by side with a growing catalogue of the games that inspired it, but is Provinciano's audience really there? "I'm not worried," he says, calmly. "With Wii, they do want to target an older audience." And the reception to *RCR*, thanks in part to a marketing push at videogame expo PAX in June, has been encouraging. "Feedback on forums was unanimously positive. We didn't get flamers and negative comments until, as far as I'm concerned, the kids got on there. A lot of kids saying this is just ripping off old games. Older people would come to its defence, though. My favourite comment was that it's '*Saints Row* meets *Pokémon*.'"

Thanks to the modern age of social networking and community engagement, Provinciano can get hold of hard data on who's following his progress. "Based on Facebook statistics [on interest regarding the game], it's 78 per cent over-18 and, of that audience, it's about 50 per cent 25 to 34," he says. "Despite that, I am shooting for a T-rating. There aren't swears – I think it's funnier that way and riffs off the sensibilities of older games. If younger gamers can get past the graphics they'll enjoy it a lot as well. You don't need to get all the references."

Though Provinciano is currently keeping his cards close to his chest, *RCR* could well make it to other platforms somewhere down the line and, in the grand tradition of gaming cash-ins, more tales from Theftropolis are already on his overactive mind. "I definitely want to do sequels," he says. "I have tons of ideas. If it sells, well, hopefully I'll get to do them." And if a sequel can achieve the same balance of silliness and scope, retrospect and revision, we hope so too.









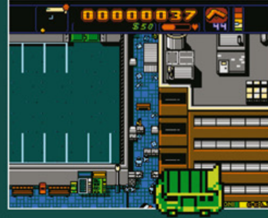
The narrative sends you hurtling through time in a telephone box (previous owners being Bill and Ted lookalikes) and lands you in the care of a mad scientist who just happens to drive a DeLorean



The opening bank heist, riffing on The Dark Knight, is funny and fast. The marriage of a modern cinema and old-school games has rarely delivered such an intertextual treat












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Heavenly star

TITLE: **CHILD OF EDEN**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **Q ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q1 2011**



Its concept document is a 40-page poem, and its final level is a crowd-sourced archive of human happiness. There is more to Child Of Eden than 'the Kinect game for the rest of us'...

Evolution takes you out of the warm, bubbling depths of the first oceans and up to the cloudy interstellar reaches of Hubble's farthest glimpses. It shows you the patterns from which life is built, and it shows you that these patterns are often the same as each other. Swinging through a tangle of axons and dendrites isn't really that different from navigating the twisting boughs of a giant tree, in the same way that it can be hard to separate a swirling clump of bacterial foam from the twisting spiral arms of a distant galaxy: it's all a question of scale. This is a fantastic journey, too, one that's filled with swarms of bioluminescent hornets and wriggling, laser-spitting squid, so when you finally reach the coldest edges of space to face off against a giant star-spangled whale, you won't be totally unprepared for it.

But the whale's not as simple as it first appears to be. Its skin is covered with angular blobs of infection, and as you begin to purge them a glowing white timeline sweeps along its flesh. The timeline reveals that this particular space whale is also an audio sequencer: each angular blob is a sound file waiting to be triggered, and once the musical battle is finished – once the whale has rolled over lazily, allowing you to scour its belly as well as its back – with a shimmer of light the monster transforms into a giant golden phoenix, a galaxy wide with its wings spread, its feathers and talons stitched together from solar systems. Finally, as the shifting waves of electronica coalesce into a full-blown J-pop chorus, the battle begins again, and that's when **Tetsuya Mizuguchi**, president of Q Entertainment and the creator of *Rez*, of *Lumines*, of *Space Channel 5*, steps back from the LCD screen and the unblinking eyes of the Kinect camera, and shakes out his arms and hands. "Exercise," he says, laughing.

The whale and the phoenix aren't alone in Mizuguchi's intergalactic bestiary, by any means. Lining the walls of Q Entertainment's snug Tokyo offices are hundreds of sketches – 1,095, according to resident concept artist **Takashi Ishihara** – depicting everything from swooping neon flu viruses to a candy-shelled manta ray, spectral flywheels and clouds of disco trilobites. Eels, sphinxes and troubling organic skyscrapers: all part of the visual design process for the studio's newest – and most ambitious – undertaking.

Back in the echoing gloom of the Los Angeles Theatre at this year's E3, *Child Of Eden* seemed tantalisingly simple to grasp. Unveiled at the start of Ubisoft's annual press event when Mizuguchi, hands clad in a showman's white gloves, waved and jabbed his way through an electrifying demo, Q's game was an opening act that the rest of the conference – and the rest of the convention – had a hard time living up to. Mizuguchi has always admitted that he can't draw inspiration from other people's work; his own, however, doesn't appear to be too much of a problem, and it seemed that, without quite saying as much, the gaming world was finally getting the *Rez* sequel it had demanded for so long. A spiritual sequel, certainly, with a separate storyline and publishing duties handled by an eclectic French company rather than the sugary, high-contrast arcade factory behind the original, but a sequel nonetheless.

There's plenty of truth to that, of course: like *Rez*, *Child Of Eden* takes a fiendishly simple paint-and-release shooter mechanic and wraps it up in complex layers of sound and colour and interlocking imagery. And, like *Rez*, you're trapped within the system once again, striving to save a universe of data from an assault by unthinking viruses. To leave it at that is to sell *Child Of Eden*

short, however, just as to say that Q's latest is the Kinect game that makes a system built for sports mini-bites and leopard-cuddling palatable to the core audience is to sell it short as well. *Child Of Eden* is both more complex than its simple control scheme suggests, and more daring for Mizuguchi than its familiar trappings would have you believe. If *Rez* was concerned with mere architecture, *Eden* is obsessed with the full spectrum of organic life; if *Rez* was about information, *Eden* is a much deeper exploration of memory.

"*Rez* is *Rez* and *Child Of Eden* is *Child Of Eden*," says Mizuguchi, batting away a familiar question with good grace. "In my mind, after *Rez*, I spent ten years with the same thought in my head all the time. I think for every game designer it's the same: what is next? I had many things about *Rez* that I wasn't 100 per cent satisfied with, so the question becomes: if I had the chance to make the next game – the next game in this spirit – what kind of game would I make?

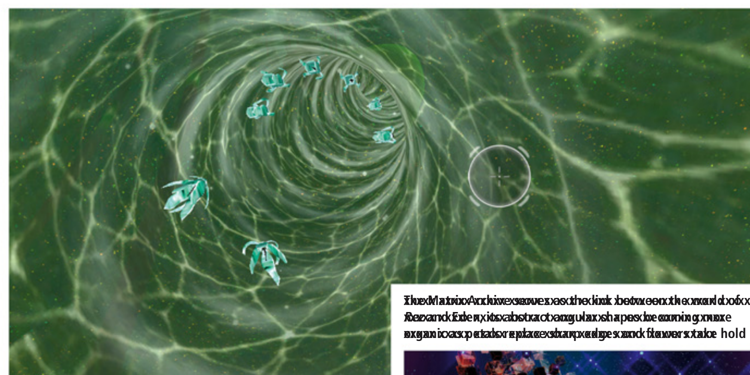
"I had ideas and inspirations, of course, but I also had to wait for the next technologies. In these ten years, we've had HD and a lot of new graphics technology. Finally, for example, we can use video to create moving textures and to have these textures move with the music. It's the same with audio: with 5.1, we get sounds that are like a gorgeous synthesiser. We can use any sounds now, not just techno sounds. We can use organic sounds, and have a much more organic chemistry, with music, video, graphics and





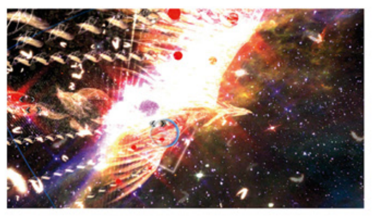


From top: Q president Tetsuya Mizuguchi, audio chief Yuki Ichiki, product manager Lindsay Gray



The Matrix Archive serves as the link between the worlds of Rez and Eden, its abstract angular shapes becoming more organic as petals replace sharp edges and flowers take hold





everything working together. What kind of world can I make from that? How can I make people feel? How can I turn this into a game?"

Mizuguchi's response to these questions was to approach the project obliquely. "Back at the beginning of this game, I wrote a memo," he says. "It's like a poem, and it's 40 pages long. What's the visual and emotional gist, and what's the story? I decided this almost at the beginning. Everybody at Q read that poem, and then we've broken it down from there."

After this unusual outline came the musical basis for the game – the element that previously saw *Rez* players reacting to everything from the

"WE HAVE A MUCH MORE ORGANIC CHEMISTRY, WITH MUSIC, VIDEO, GRAPHICS AND EVERYTHING WORKING TOGETHER. SO, WHAT CAN THIS MAKE PEOPLE FEEL?"

high-energy pinball futurism of Keiichi Sugiyama's Buggie Running Bleeps to the sinister urban distortion of Adam Freeland's Fear. With *Child Of Eden*, however, Mizuguchi's looking to tell a more complex story, and that requires a lot more control over the soundtrack. "Given what I wrote in the poem, Genki Rockets seemed like a natural choice. Genki is my music project, and it's become very tightly entwined with the game. It's a conceptual band, and its background story is based around an imaginary singer, Lumi. Lumi's born in outer space in 2019, and she's always dreaming about getting down to Earth, but she can't. She's getting old, and she's still dreaming and imagining about the Earth. That was the inspiration for the lyrics of all the Genki Rockets songs.

"She's always watching the Earth, and she can touch our planet through media like the internet, but she has no real experiences. I wanted to combine the concepts of Genki Rockets and *Child Of Eden*. So I thought that, after Lumi's death, maybe 200 years later, some scientists try to remake her consciousness in a computer world. Eden is the future of the internet: it's there to tell people who were born in space about Earth, and it's organised into these different Archives that break down what it's like to be human, and to tell new humans about our ambitions and history. These scientists try to rebuild Lumi in this Eden, but at the same time a virus gets in, too. *Child Of Eden*'s story is about purifying the virus as you go through the Archives. And as you purify this virus, Lumi's consciousness starts to come back; her memories and her personality come back. She starts to sing, and emotion and positivity return to the world of Eden."

As starting points go, it's not a million miles away from the concept behind *Rez* and its virus-squashing speed runs. Crucially, however, the fiction is pointed outwards rather than inwards this time, with standard cyberspace iconography replaced with Mizuguchi's particular brand of engagingly earnest optimism about the contemporary world. The tagline for *Child Of Eden* is 'Hope and Happiness', and this message is being delivered with such an audacious design that even the most cynical of players may find it hard to snigger.

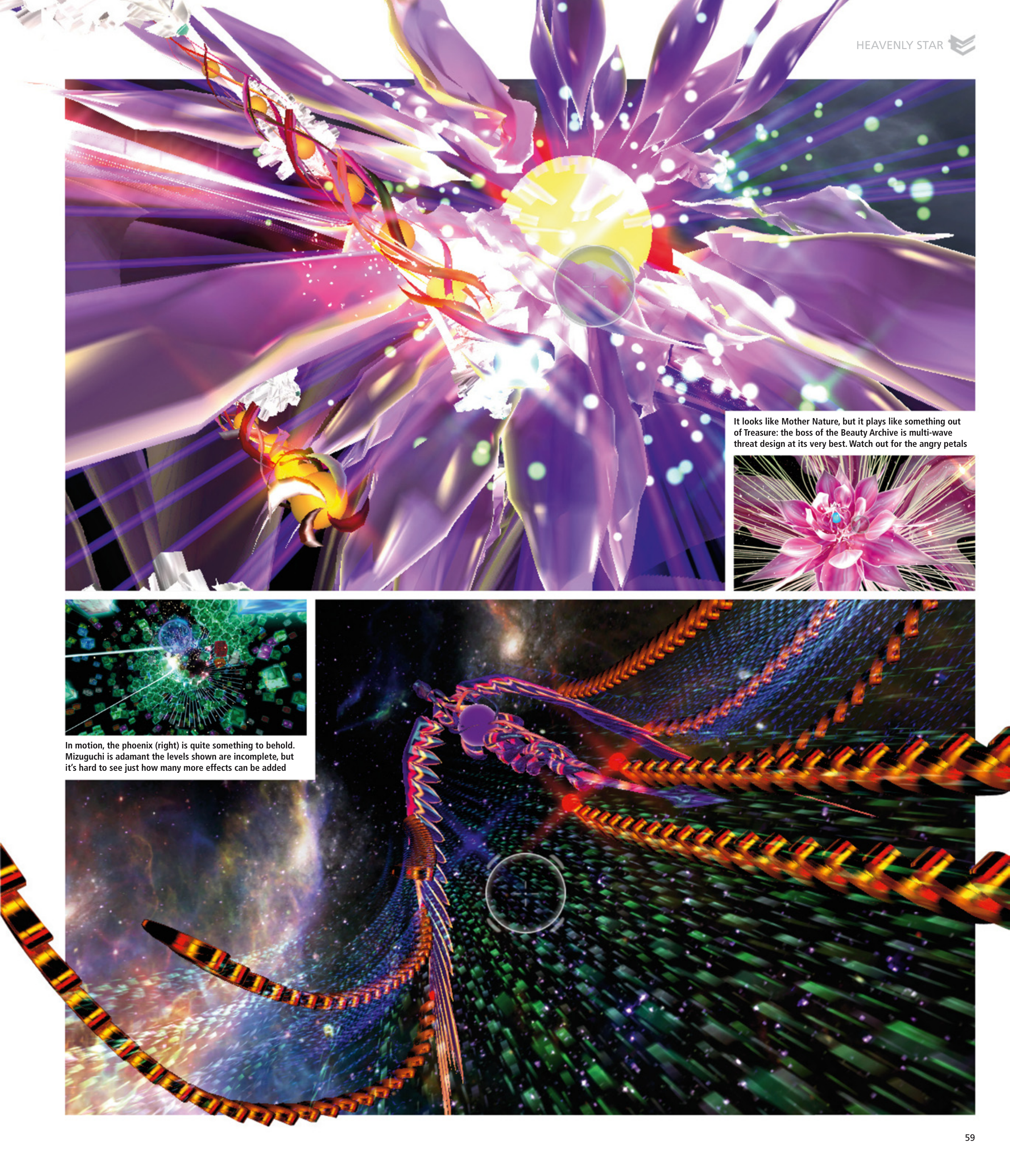
Mizuguchi's new focus permeates all levels of the otherwise familiar structure, so the series of Archives that replace *Rez*'s five distinct areas aren't spiky slices of science-fiction datascape this time; they're dreamy explorations of human preoccupations, with levels themed around everything from beauty and evolution to an interpretation of passion that is so jarringly imaginative we don't want to spoil it for you.



Zero history

At the heart of *Child Of Eden* lies Stage Zero, a combination of selection screen and progress tracker. "It's a menu plus a kind of synaesthesia experience," suggests Mizuguchi. "If you go into the Beauty Archive, for example, or Matrix, and you purify some things, you'll get some new items to bring back to Stage Zero, so all the time the music and the moving visual elements are evolving."

"It's a visualiser," adds Lindsay Gray, Q's product manager. "The more you play, the more you unlock, and the more you'll get to see on this screen. It's the face of the entire game."



It looks like Mother Nature, but it plays like something out of Treasure: the boss of the Beauty Archive is multi-wave threat design at its very best. Watch out for the angry petals

In motion, the phoenix (right) is quite something to behold. Mizuguchi is adamant the levels shown are incomplete, but it's hard to see just how many more effects can be added







Photography: **Hiroki Izumi**

Clockwise from left: Tetsuya Mizuguchi takes a back seat as (left to right) Kinect programmer Yoshio Inoue, coder Takanori Uchida, level designer Kengo Kobayashi and artist Takahashi Ishihara explain some of *Child Of Eden*'s finer details; Mizuguchi demonstrates the Kinect functionality; a memento from a previous musical project of Mizuguchi's

The sections unveiled so far reveal a familiar imagination working on a very different kind of canvas, in other words. "*Rez* was a very physical kind of stimulation," argues Mizuguchi. "It was about speed and sensation, and we couldn't put more dramatic elements in there. Now, we can do that: this is a new construction, and it's physical and emotional. Some elements, like the sound and images coinciding, are taken from *Rez* and *Lumines* – this is like a lifelong preoccupation for me – but there are differences now as well."

Matrix, the Archive showcased in a stripped-back form at E3, is apparently the game's most *Rez*-like space: a neon world built from bright edges and narrow corridors, powered by the insistent heartbeat of the drum track. Even here, however, the design team can be seen stretching itself, sprinkling environments with hot pink flowers covered in deadly fibre-optic petals before building to a boss battle that appears to involve an origami space station modelled on disco equipment. Beyond that, Beauty sends you racing over frozen hillsides riddled with glass fir trees, and Evolution thrusts you deep underwater where plastic jellyfish swim through drifting ladders of DNA. Everywhere, the level design seems more roomy – even though you're still on rails – and there's a warm strand of animal biology running through the technological landscapes of Eden, too.

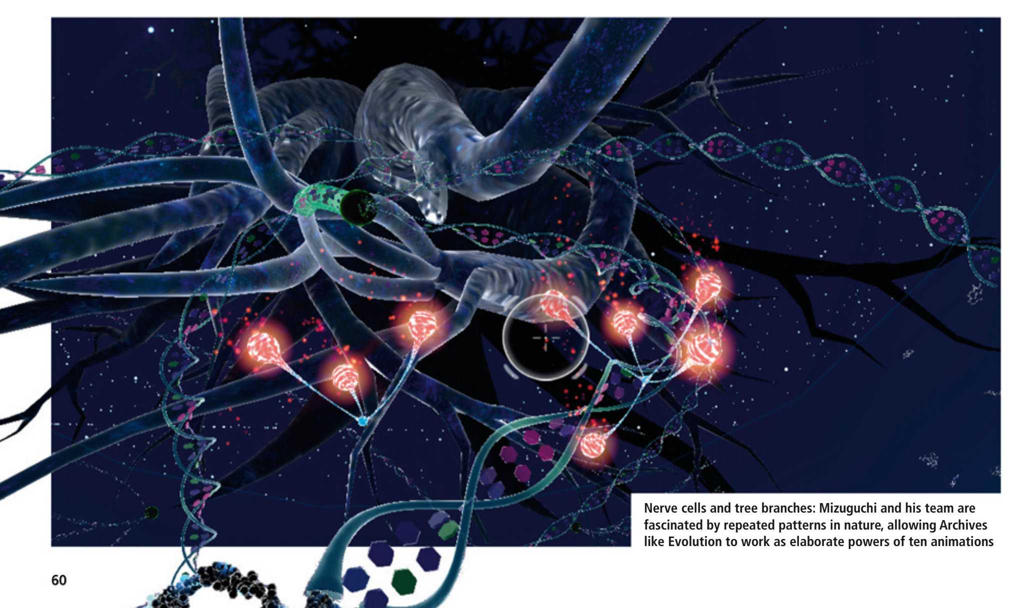
"WE'RE STILL EVOLVING THE SYSTEM. YOU DO HAVE TO REIN THINGS IN SOMETIMES TO MAKE IT EASIER FOR KINECT TO RECOGNISE SPECIFIC GESTURES"

"A lot of the time, I'm drawing designs based on the music track, and also for key words I'm given for each level," explains Ishihara when asked how the developer is turning each Archive's loose concept into a coherent audiovisual experience. "For Evolution, for example, we want to see that at work: we want to see living organisms changing as you go deeper, and we want you to get a feel for the natural world. Above that, you also get several motifs that emerge naturally throughout the course of the entire game. You'll see images of the Earth emerging in several stages, and images depicting human history and achievements coming back again and again."

Mizuguchi hopes that the organic emphasis will make for a more human experience, which is why he's using pop songs rather than electronica to tie each Archive together. "Being able to use the human voice was a huge shift in things," he remembers. "We couldn't cut actual voice in with the electronic sounds at the time of *Rez*: it never would have worked properly. Now, we can do it, and we can even have the voice cutting in and out depending on the enemies you fight."

With Lumi's singing leading you through each level, then, the insistent escalating beat of *Rez* is replaced with a kind of human breadcrumb trail: a ribbon of melody that tugs you deeper into each Archive. This personal touch has been a huge help to the designers when it comes to orientating players in such an unusual series of spaces, too. "In a normal game, if you have a river, you can just use a river sound effect," laughs **Yuki Ichiki**, *Child Of Eden*'s audio lead. "Here, we just can't do that. We're trying to create new sounds for everything, often quite abstract things, and that can get confusing. The player represents a challenge beyond that, too: even if they're not playing well, we needed to find a way to retain a base level of melody, which then gets more gorgeous and more intense as they start to really master things. If Lumi means that you don't notice any of this, we've done our jobs."

And, yes, on top of this new artistic focus, comes a new way of controlling the game. Happily, played with Kinect, *Child Of Eden* is a thrilling experience. The roaming target reticule feels surprisingly responsive when controlled by a wave of a hand, and there's a generous, yet unobtrusive, stickiness when selecting targets. Once up to eight enemies have been highlighted, shots are launched with a quick



Nerve cells and tree branches: Mizuguchi and his team are fascinated by repeated patterns in nature, allowing Archives like Evolution to work as elaborate powers of ten animations

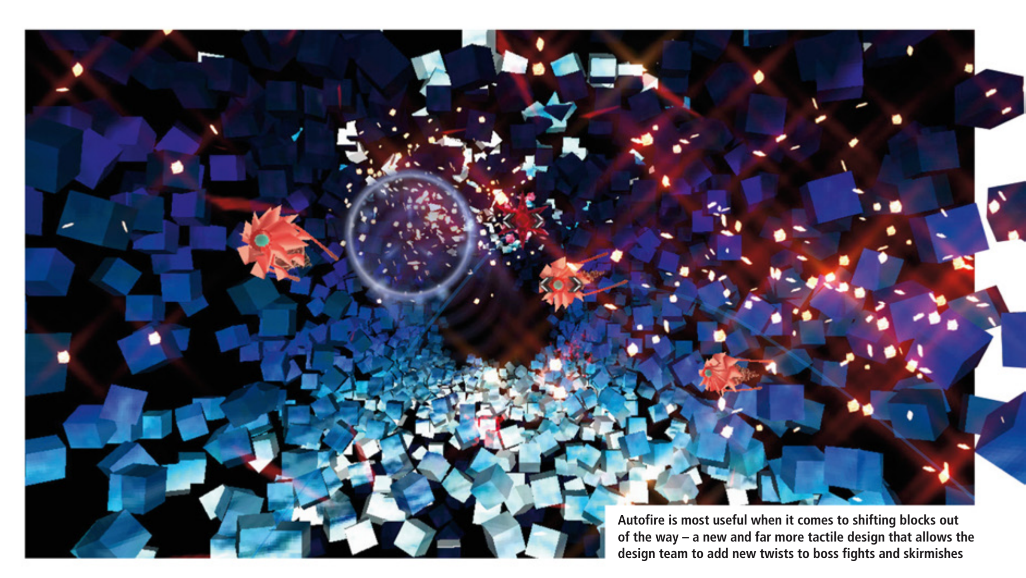
Fans of Denki Rockets will be humming away to old tunes with new mixes. Star Line is particularly effective, building through the level until the chorus finally spills out with the boss

flick of the fingers, while a short, sharp clapping motion allows you to switch to a new autofire weapon, and specials are triggered by lifting both arms in the air in a move the team has unofficially termed 'the happy bomb'.

Simple to learn and unexpectedly dramatic to play, although *Child Of Eden* wasn't originally conceived as a motion-controlled title, a quick blast through Matrix suggests it's a convincing implementation. "Kinect matches the gameplay we're after very well," says Kinect programmer **Yoshio Inoue**, who suggests that the secret to successful implementation lies in iteration. "Even now we're still adjusting the controls. Early on, you could use two hands – one for rapid fire and one for the lock on – and for a time we even explored using your whole body to control the camera, but we're still evolving the system." Inoue's learned to keep the gesture recognition broad and somewhat forgiving, however. "There were instances when we struggled," he admits. "At first, for the weapon-switching clap, we tried measuring things like arm speed and the distance between the hands, and the game ended up responding to just my body – it wouldn't work for anyone else. You do have to rein things in sometimes to make it easier for Kinect to recognise specific gestures."

Playing through the game with a standard pad, however, provides a welcome chance to enjoy the shooter formula's new-found intricacy, as the stickiness and assists are dialled back, the reticule shrinks, and the different types of shots available show their true potential. *Child Of Eden*'s a surprisingly strategic blaster: Matrix's boss, for example, requires autofire attacks to move a shield of swarming cubes out of the way before a glowing core can be taken down with targeted shots. It's far more dynamic and tactical than anything *Rez* had to offer, and it reinforces the fact that, for all the game's artful trappings and poetic design, *Child Of Eden* is still being built with a twitchy arcade-honed perspective, and is filled with attack waves, enemy tells, survival spaces to clear and threats to neutralise.

"There's a lot in here that we've learnt beyond *Rez*," agrees Mizuguchi when asked about the strategic aspects the new weapon



Autofire is most useful when it comes to shifting blocks out of the way – a new and far more tactile design that allows the design team to add new twists to boss fights and skirmishes



system brings with it. "There are many elements taken from *Lumines* and even *Space Channel 5* in here. This is all about reactions, about positive feelings, and there's got to be a call-and-response spiral to that. There are bits of puzzle games, bits of rhythm-action in the mix to keep it flowing. It's moving architecture."

"We have enemies that can only be defeated with one weapon or with another," chimes in level designer **Kengo Kobayashi**. "You need to balance that out and keep the pace changing. That lets us add to the synaesthesia aspects people expect, too, in the way that your weapons affect the enemies: each weapon gives you a different audio and visual response. As you move through the stage purifying things, the lighting changes, your weapons create different reactions, and you'll see more of Lumi emerging." And how does he approach getting that all-important sense of escalation right given so many onscreen variables? "Trial and error," he laughs. "Trial and error."

Such a precise shooter mechanic seems like a worrying concept to graft on to unproven motion-sensing technology, but, due to the thoughtful way Q has approached Kinect, it's best to think of the pad and the camera as a choice between two distinct experiences rather than mere control schemes. Reading between the lines, Mizuguchi's team has realised Microsoft's new tech can't offer quite the level of precision needed for dependable assaults on leaderboard tables, but it gives players a perfect opportunity to perform instead. Playing *Child Of Eden* with Kinect is a fantastical and stylish experience. The game promises to be every bit as intoxicating for score fanatics as *Rez* was, then, but motion control offers players something else besides: *Child Of Eden* should be a delight to simply watch people interact with. It's the arcade shooter as spectator sport.

"Microsoft allowed me to see the new technology early on," says Mizuguchi, "and the first time I saw it, I realised it was very exciting; it's like the future. I'm like a wizard when I play, an audiovisual conductor. There are trade-offs, of course. If you play this game with the controller, you can feel the vibration feedback. This is very important to me, going all the way back to the Trance Vibrator with *Rez*. The physical connection is very important. With Kinect, you don't have the physical experience, then, but you get the new experience, which seemed very valuable too. We decided, OK, let's do both."

And even with Kinect, there's a certain degree of finesse available. First playthroughs with motion control may well be clumsy and thrilling by turn, but Mizuguchi's stylish performance sees him chaining sweeping runs of hits together, moving his arm in broad arcs as orange rectangles light up along the side of a boss, locking on to every single one, and then unleashing shots with a smart wriggle of his fingers. Rather than a compromise, it's actually a chance to get a new, more physical, perspective on shooters: when you're watching the player's body as well as the screen, you can truly see the elegance of enemy attack patterns, the graceful arcs and spirals of the waves as they unfold.

Compared to the puzzle games and mobile titles which have made up the bulk of Q's output to date, *Child Of Eden* is an ambitious undertaking – and that's before you take into account the developer's plans for the game's finale. "Journey is the final Archive," says Mizuguchi. "It's the end of the trip, so it's Lumi's own Archive. All of her memories are in there. As you purify the Archive, her memories return, and synchronise with everyone else's."

Tokyo pull this off, Q Entertainment used the Tokyo Game Show to announce the Journey Project, a website initiative that offers fans the chance to send in snapshots of their favourite memories of Earth to be put directly into the last Archive: a blending of game and audience which seems entirely in keeping with *Child Of Eden*'s themes. "It's a way for everybody's memory to be in the game alongside Lumi," enthuses Mizuguchi. "It's like a time capsule. Please, send us your happy memories."

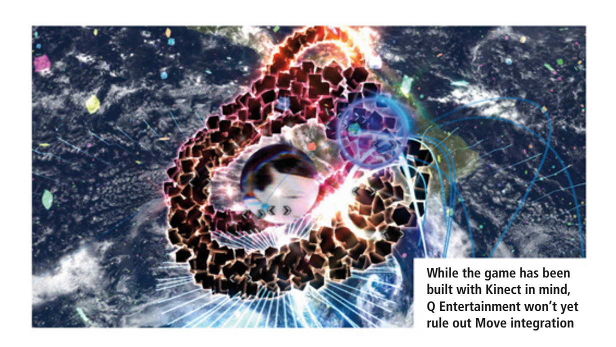
Speaking of memories, it's hard to forget that, despite the downward trend, the excited chatter at this year's E3 was dominated for the most part by two Japanese creations: 3DS and *Child Of Eden*. If you're starting to look at the videogame landscape and feel like an outcast on so many indistinguishable battlefields, or a poisoned survivor just scraping by in a drab post-holocaust world, Mizuguchi's exploration of emotional information may well seem more imaginative – and more human – than many titles you've slogged through in the last decade.

It's a delicate balance, then, but if Q gets it right, *Child Of Eden* could provide the comforting return of a classic, with a change in scope dramatic enough to show players something entirely new at the same time. For now, however, Mizuguchi's just enjoying the journey. "When I started the Genki Rockets project, I had a vision for this game," he says as the HD screen behind him shimmers with fireflies and snow angels. "It was fuzzy, but it's becoming clearer. It's becoming clearer all the time."

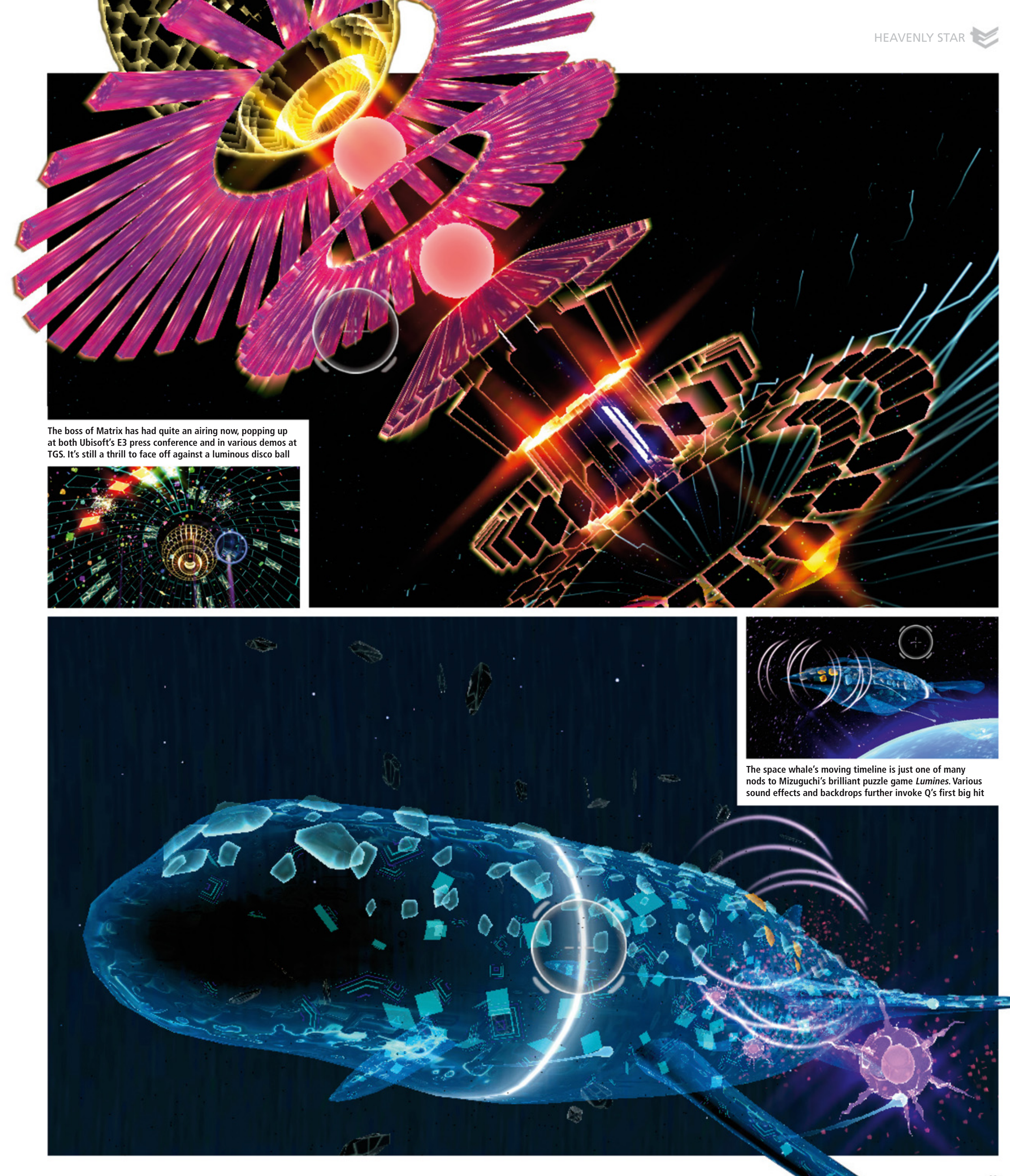
Skeleton crew

***Child Of Eden*'s skeletal calibration system gives you an opportunity to see what Microsoft's motion technology looks like in the hands of artists rather than engineers. Turning the player's body into a swarm of fireflies, games are initiated by moving your arms up and down, leaving a faded snow angel imprint on the TV screen. Giving Kinect a chance to pinpoint various crucial points of articulation, it's also a strangely fitting ceremony with which to kick off each performance.**

"THE FIRST TIME I SAW KINECT, I REALISED IT WAS VERY EXCITING; IT'S LIKE THE FUTURE. I'M LIKE A WIZARD WHEN I PLAY, AN AUDIOVISUAL CONDUCTOR"



While the game has been built with Kinect in mind, Q Entertainment won't yet rule out Move integration



The boss of Matrix has had quite an airing now, popping up at both Ubisoft's E3 press conference and in various demos at TGS. It's still a thrill to face off against a luminous disco ball

The space whale's moving timeline is just one of many nods to Mizuguchi's brilliant puzzle game *Lumines*. Various sound effects and backdrops further invoke Q's first big hit


NO
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DIE

Xbox Live's Indie Games service is home to hundreds of tites that define the new era of DIY. Which ones are setting the agenda, and what inspired their authors to create some of the most distinctive games on Xbox 360?

It was designed to be the YouTube for games – and Microsoft's Indie platform has delivered on that promise in spirit, if not in numbers. Powered by the stripped-back development framework XNA, the Indie Games menu on the 360 dash has been steadily filling up with homebrew since its launch in late 2008, and now has over 800 titles available. And, as with any trawl through YouTube, in among the oddball offerings – amid the clones, the cranks and the outright botches – you'll find topical games, parody games and games built around internet memes.

You'll also find a handful of genuine crackers. While the Indie Games store is in desperate need of intelligent curatorship, separating the service's hidden gems from the ugly blunders and Avatar-powered cash-ins, there are now more than enough interesting titles on offer to justify a few hours' mindless browsing. Certainly, at their worst, Indie Games are crash-prone messes with indecipherable controls, but at their best they can offer the kind of experiences you can't easily squeeze through a traditional publishing deal: a singular vision; a mechanic or setting that pays no lip-service to the desires of the general marketplace.

Developers continue to complain of low sales, poor visibility and a healthy chunk of the profits going to the platform holder, but that hasn't kept the best of them from their keyboards. And ultimately, although it's far from perfect, Microsoft's initiative has been genuinely revolutionary. Putting aside fertile niches like Sony's Net Yaroze project, for the first time in 30 years of videogame history, amateur designers of all levels of ability have the opportunity to see their ideas flicker and fizz on consoles around the world. Here are 20 titles that deserve recognition.



Q&A: BRENDON CHUNG

Game: **Flotilla**
Company: **Blendo Games**

How was Blendo Games formed?
Making games has long been a hobby of mine. After the studio I was working for closed, I fell in love with the idea of supporting myself through this hobby so I started Blendo Games. I've released two games, with a third in the oven.

How early on did you start considering XBLIG as a platform for your games?
XBLIG is certainly an interesting experiment in democratising game development. It provides an incredibly low barrier of entry for console game distribution. I jumped on the opportunity as soon as I learned about it. Due to the way XNA works, the XBLIG and PC versions of *Flotilla* share the same code and were concurrently developed. They're

ANCIENT TRADER

Developer: **Fourkidsgames** Price: **240MP**



One of the more mature and refined Indie Games seen so far, Fourkidsgames' nautical turn-based strategy offering sees you exploring parchment seas and facing off against all manner of illustrated marine villainy as you trade precious commodities and engage in a series of pacy battles.

And beneath the beautiful cross-hatched surface lies an intelligent and fiercely tactical game, with generous map design and excellent combat options. Despite the attention that's clearly been lavished on the title, there's still a certain roughness to the interface at times, but that only goes to make the team's overall achievement seem all the more unlikely – unlikelier still when you take into account the depth of the multiplayer options. An imaginative spin on an increasingly tired genre, *Ancient Trader* is ambitious, devious and surprisingly hard to fault.

KODU GAME LAB

Developer: **MSR Kodu** Price: **400MP**



Kodu Game Lab sees the XBLIG platform taking a welcome trip down the rabbit hole by means of a simple development kit that allows players to piece together their own games. Designed by a team of Microsoft employees, *Kodu* is a simple yet powerful suite of tools that encourages people with no programming background at all to have a go at creating everything from basic racing titles to full-blown RPGs.

Primarily aimed at children, it's limited but intensely satisfying to use, swiftly guiding novices through the pleasures and pains of development as it introduces ideas as straightforward as the placement of in-game objects and as complex as the beginnings of AI behaviour construction. Tutorials are brief but very handy. Better yet, the inclusion of a range of example levels and designs is testament to the thoughtfulness with which the whole package has been built. At 400MP, *Kodu Game Lab* is nearly public service software.

I MAED A GAM3 W1TH Z0MB1ES!!!1

Developer: **James Silva** Price: **80MP**



With over a quarter of a million copies sold, James Silva's bubblegum twin-stick gorefest is the poster boy for Microsoft's XBLIG service: the little game that could, the playful joke that almost everybody enjoys. And it's a strange beast for a chart-topper, taking one of the most well-worn of videogame control mechanics as its basis before layering on a shifting, pulsating visual backdrop, flinging in some chunky power-ups and, best of all, setting the whole mess to the beat of a horribly catchy theme tune.

Z0mb1es is based on old ideas, then, but Silva's given them a contemporary twist. This is the game as pop song: an idea that would be unthinkable – and unworkable – through any other delivery channel. On XBLIG, however, it's found its perfect audience, and its success has propelled Silva into the top tier of the indie development hierarchy, landing him an XBLA contract in the process.

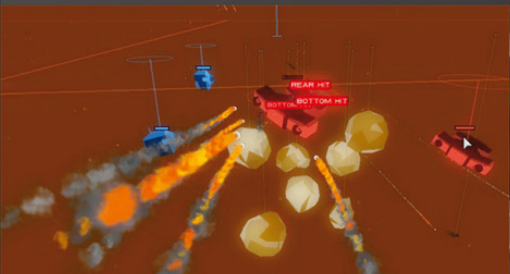
mostly identical, aside from UI and control differences.

What are the main influences on *Flotilla*?
I'm a big film nerd, so Stanley Kubrick, Wong Kar-Wai and Woody Allen inform my work more than I care to admit. *Flotilla*'s goal was to play with the idea of player-generated narrative, via events and characters randomly scattered across the game universe. The player's decisions unlock new story beats and close off others – "poking the Jell-O," so to speak.

What has its reception been like on XBLIG?
The PC version has far outsold the XBLIG version. I can only assume the two platforms have audiences who look for different things. XBLIG is a great way to cut your teeth on console game development. It has its fair share of kinks, but I'd definitely suggest it as a starting point for fledgling developers.

FLOTILLA

Developer: **Blendo Games** Price: **400MP**



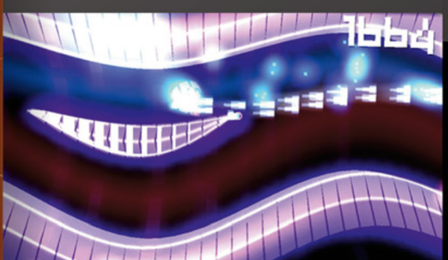
Space Invaders by way of Stanley Kubrick, *Flotilla* manages to be stately, austere and vividly demented at the same time. Its 3D space battles move at a snail's pace, but they're a dream come true for armchair strategists who can delight in the intricacies of positioning, course-plotting and missile trajectories before unleashing a volley of slow-moving warheads – most of which will then miss their targets.

Bright migraine colours aside, it's a believable take on the physics of cosmic warfare, which is why the plot, with its kooky bestiary and bizarre loot, provides such a perfect counterpoint. There's a hint of sadness amid the pranks, however, as your ailing pilot heads out for one doomed interstellar ramble after the next.

Blendo Games' Brendon Chung has already made a name for himself with wilful titles such as *Gravity Bone*, but with *Flotilla* he's hit the unlikeliest of sweet spots – a game as exacting as it is quirky, a stiff challenge beneath a sugar coating.

LEAVE HOME

Developer: **Hermitgames** Price: **80MP**



Coded by one-man micro-studio Matt James, *Leave Home* doesn't just embody the bedroom workshop ideals of the Indie Games initiative: it presents a vivid, nerve-jangling art shooter that rivals the best of its kind on any platform. A fixed-duration score-run with levels that restitch themselves around the player depending on their own performance, this is an exquisite blend of the mechanical and the organic, throwing plastic squid, disco-ball amoebas and all manner of other glimmering, chintzy enemies against you as you take on your real rival – the high-score table.

The adaptive level design means that both memory and improvisation skills combine as the game's micro-encounters shuffle themselves in and out of the pack, while the lone fixed point of the bullet-hell climax provides the perfect spur to drive you into your next replay. Brief but unforgettable, *Leave Home* represents the absolute pinnacle of Indie Game creativity.

TEXT ZEDVENTURE

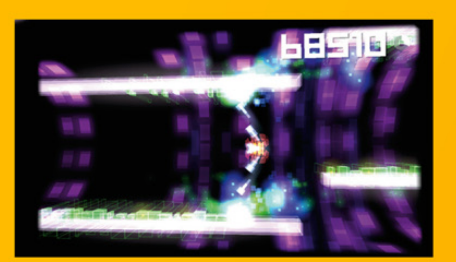
Developer: **Crazyreyn** Price: **80MP**

You crouch in the corner. A man stumbles out of the storeroom with a firearm in his hand. He drops a rucksack onto the counter and fills it with ammunition.

Stay put and observe
Approach the man

With so many bedroom coders burying their debut creations under avalanches of particle effects and greasy smears of bloom, *Text Zedventure* stands out as a far more controlled offering. A throwback to the days of *Zork* and *Adventure*, Matthew Reynolds' debut is an interactive fiction title that sees you escaping from an infected city by reading through pithy little paragraphs of scene-setting text and making a series of quick tactical decisions.

Short but enviably sharp, with a streamlined interface and evocative visual design, *Text Zedventure* makes an ideal break from the twin-sticks and side-scrollers gumming up the Indie Games platform. It's a relic, certainly, but a charming and very literate one. Built by a single designer who has no development background to speak of, it also offers a sensible template for anyone tempted to get stuck into XNA for themselves.



Q&A: MATT JAMES

Game: **Leave Home**
Company: **Hermitgames**

Was *Leave Home* always going to be an XBLIG title?
It's an arcade kind of game, and I wanted to play it on a pad sitting on a sofa. I think XBLIG is pretty great, being able to distribute to Xbox without needing to go through any concept approval or publishing nonsense. They handle some really boring stuff really well, like hosting, demo-to-full purchasing and payment. It's only the lack of care over the shop interface that lets it down, really.

Why do you think scrolling shooters are so popular on XBLIG?
I suppose it's a genre that's not served very well by the mainstream any more. One of the reasons I wanted to make a shooter is I liked the idea of

PLATFORMANCE: CASTLE PAIN

Developer: **Magiko Gaming** Price: **80MP**



Combining a simple agenda with toxically intricate geography, *Platformance: Castle Pain* is a kind of incremental platform game that sees you working your way through a vast and complex castle, stopping every few seconds to expire on the business end of an axe or be frightened to death by a flock of passing ghouls.

As the name suggests, this is a game to be mastered and then exploited for showboating purposes: a cruel process that requires an audience in order to truly shine. It's brutally difficult, too, with queues of demanding jumps, throngs of roving enemies and plenty of other opportunities for instant death. As with the best of its kind, however, *Castle Pain* is fair (in its own way) and filled with more than enough humour and gimmickry to ensure that you'll keep fighting through to the bitter end.

MITHRA – EPISODE 1: THE CALLING

Developer: **Afiction Games** Price: **240MP**



Mithra: The Calling is one of the unlikelier games to have washed up on the shores of the XBLIG platform: a lavish – and often rather gaudy – 3D adventure title in which two alien freaks must fend off a devastating invasion in a classic point-and-click manner. The puzzles are mostly tart and precise, but it's the production values and endless design ambition that really dazzle, as developer Afiction offers up quibble-free controls, an engrossing narrative and a suite of lovely environments filled with evocative detailing and the odd red herring.

Subsequent instalments have yet to turn up in the months since *Episode 1*'s release – suggesting, rather reassuringly, that the prospect of credible episodic gaming is as difficult for XNA developers as it is for everyone else. But despite the short running time and the open ending, *The Calling* is a quietly astonishing feat of indie programming.

APPLE JACK

Developer: **My Owl Software** Price: **80MP**



My Owl Software's fruit-headed hero is an oddly grotesque creation, but that hasn't put off players, who've kept *Apple Jack* in the Top Downloads section of the Indie Games menu since its release. A straightforward yet creative platformer that sees you exploring warped variations on the Home Counties, this is a slice of old-school design with a tilt towards the high-score table that lends it real replayablity.

Exploration and combat are nicely balanced as you rove around a series of small levels, finishing off the locals by picking them up and chucking them at one another. Once you've got into the game's groove, a decent combo system encourages you to use enemies as resources, while trickier areas can only be reached after you've taken a lead from *Metroid* and transformed your protagonist into an apple small enough to roll under low ledges. With a generous clutch of environments to chew through, *Apple Jack* is rich and personable – a pleasingly British platformer that effortlessly evokes the glory days of ZX Spectrum-era game creation.

working with a very specific ingrained genre with behaviour, player expectation and gameplay rules I could deliberately break or reference.

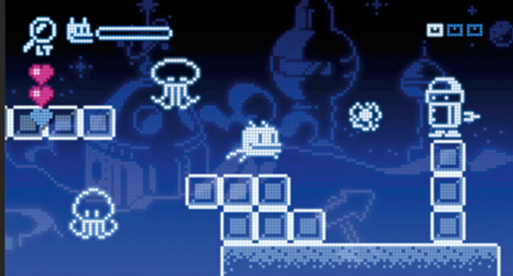
Was it hard to get press interest in an XBLIG title?
I've been pretty lucky with the press in the end but sales have been pretty low once the game disappeared off the dashboard lists. Nothing seems to make much difference to sales.

It would be good if Microsoft could sort out the game browsing on the dashboard so that when people read about a game it's not so difficult to find.

Without XBLIG, would you have been tempted to pursue other channels to get your games on consoles?
It's pretty difficult to get a game like *Leave Home* on consoles, even the online channels like PSN, XBLA and WiiWare. Persuading them they want to release a coming-of-age story told as a horizontal shooter where one person did the code, design, audio and graphics is tricky. I suppose they see that as a risk or something. I'm not really interested in spending time pitching or describing what I'm going to do, or asking for permission either. I don't really know what the game is going to be like until it's done, anyway. XBLIG suits me pretty well: I can just get on with making games.

ARKEDO SERIES 03 – PIXEL!

Developer: **Arkedo Games** Price: **240MP**

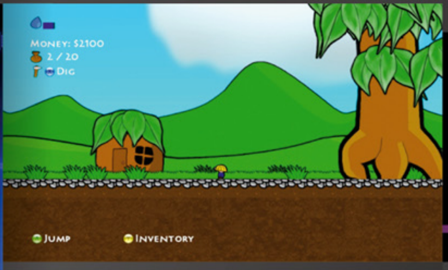


The small team at Arkedo are leading figures in an emerging trend. The Paris-based studio has been stepping away from the world of professional development on piracy-ridden platforms in an attempt to make money with XNA titles instead. After boutique charmers such as *Big Bang Mini* and *Nervous Brickdown* on DS, *Pixel!* is the third – and most complete – of the outfit's Indie Game offerings.

Guiding a luminous pixelated cat through a series of simple 2D levels is slick and enjoyable, particularly when the adventure opens out and each new level starts to throw in a handful of fresh ideas, ranging from moving platforms and increasingly dangerous enemies, through to the likes of puzzle-based set-pieces and micro-maze mini-games. It's traditional stuff delivered with a cutting-edge aesthetic. It may seem almost unfair to see an established indie developer competing alongside the amateurs, but when the games in question are as warm and delightful as this, it's hard to bear a grudge.

MINER DIG DEEP

Developer: **Robir** Price: **80MP**

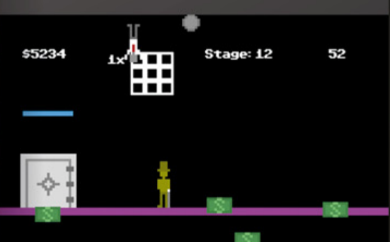


Be careful: appearances can be deceptive, and *Miner Dig Deep* isn't the simple *Boulderdash* clone it initially appears to be. Rather, it's a bizarre blend of *Rogue* and *Farmville* as you explore a growing network of underground tunnels, searching for the resources you'll need to upgrade your equipment and ultimately expand your excavations.

With no enemies and very few sources of overt danger, it makes for a hypnotic form of grinding. While uniformly basic graphics and little in the way of intelligent sound design suggest that you won't be playing this for the aesthetic pleasures, as your subterranean network steadily spreads and your stockpile of goodies starts to build up, you may find it increasingly difficult to down tools and turn your attention to something more meaningful. A casual game dressed in retro mechanics, this is disconcertingly effective stuff: approach with caution.

BAILOUT!

Developer: **ChefTeslaCoil** Price: **80MP**



Bailout!'s primitive stylings hide the fact that it's the embodiment of a very modern idea: the videogame as a form of topical commentary – one that, on this occasion, takes the form of a simple score challenge based around the global financial crisis.

Collect the falling money and dodge the plummeting bankers: as satire it's fairly blunt stuff, but as a tight little arcade game it's genuinely satisfying to get to grips with as you navigate the small playing area, darting in and out of danger spots and struggling to reach the big payoffs. If the Indie Games platform really is to bring a touch of YouTube's timeliness to the traditionally unresponsive world of console games on a regular basis, it would be heartening to think its games will all be as well-rounded and considered as this one.



Q&A: CAMILLE GUERMONPREZ

Game: **Arkedo**
Company: **Arkedo Series 03 – Pixel!**

What made you choose to focus on XBLIG after working on DS games?
There were good and bad reasons. The bad one was that we got dumped by a publisher mid-course: a project they had asked us to do was simply cancelled. The good reason was we wanted to see if we could still be relevant with a bigger screen. The cancelled project was a first step – it was a Wii game – but we really wanted to have fun with the 360. And the really good reason was because we're lazy, so we chose the easiest dev environment. And Indie Games is pretty cool: you don't have to buy a devkit, XNA is great and there's no lengthy approval process.

Does XBLIG development fit in well alongside other projects?
It was so easy to code stuff with XNA that we decided to start one of our dreams: being able to make small projects – two guys for a month or two – on a regular basis, as bits of fresh air during lengthier 18-month projects. It keeps the energy up for everyone, clears your mind a little, and it's always nice to have something tangible after you've 'relaxed'.

TRINO

Developer: **TrinoTeam**
Price: **240MP**



A finalist in Microsoft's Dream Build Play design contest back in 2008, *Trino* is a strangely thrilling action puzzler built around a mechanic that sees you capturing your enemies by constructing a triangular web around them. It's a simple idea, but one that works well in the game's pressurised levels as your nanotech foes swarm down from the sky, making evasion and forward planning as much of a necessity as quick fingers.

With a range of enemy types and a trio of nasty bosses to take on, *Trino* is the epitome of a tiny idea taken to clever extremes. A sparsely detailed game, this is possessed of a core that's more than satisfying enough to make up for its general lack of frills.

AVATAR GOLF

Developer: **Barkers Crest**
Price: **400MP**

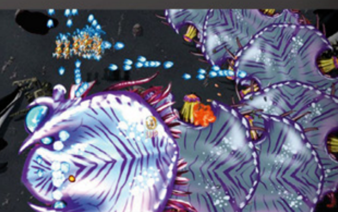


There are plenty of Indie Games that include Avatar support – the Top Downloads charts tend to be clogged with them, in fact – but few manage to emerge as little more than an opportunistic novelty. *Avatar Golf* may not be a particularly groundbreaking offering, then, but it is a surprisingly accomplished and fully featured sports game, with responsive control, a wide range of environments and expansive online features that will see you designing and sharing custom courses as well as taking part in Xbox Live matches.

With co-op options, pleasantly solid visuals and a decent putting mode, this is a generous and competitive arcade sports title. You may find yourself swiftly silencing the placeholder Eurobeat soundtrack, but that's surely a small price to pay for a game that allows you to tee off while decked out as a *BioShock* Big Daddy.

SHOOT 1UP

Developer: **Mommy's Best Games**
Price: **80MP**

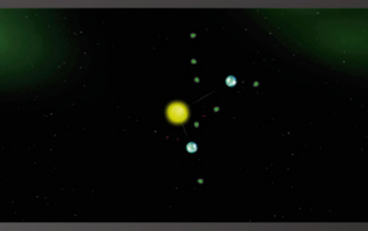


From the developer behind early XBLIG darling *Weapon Of Choice*, *Shoot 1UP* is a side-scrolling shooter sufficiently creative to stand out on a platform that often seems to be gradually drowning in the genre.

Beneath the steady parade of self-consciously bizarre hand-drawn enemies, the game has some clever ideas to latch on to, the most immediate being the fact that any 1-ups you collect in the course of play kick in immediately, throwing a new ship on to the battlefield and allowing you to ramp up your offensive until you're in charge of a shimmering armada of spacecraft. Besides providing a leftfield palette-cleanser for genre veterans, this asymmetric take on bullet hell is also surprisingly accessible to newcomers. And if you find yourself stuck somewhere in between those camps, a fulsome range of options will allow you to tweak the game until it plays just the way you want it to.

SOLAR

Developer: **Murudai**
Price: **80MP**



Like *Katamari Damacy*, *Solar* initially seems to be a peaceful, friendly kind of game, until you realise that you're cast in the role of a force of nature so devastating that most other developers would save you for the final crushing boss encounter. Casting you as a rogue sun rushing around a huge galaxy, busting up other star systems and forming a chain of planets, Murudai's thoughtful offering is as much a science playset as it is a game, as you capture pieces of space rock and slowly build them into new worlds, fuelling their own burning cores with the detritus of passing civilisations.

A range of challenge missions bring some order to proceedings should you want it, but *Solar* works best as a pure galactic ball pit, ripe for experimentation and open-ended tinkering. With sleek, rather stylish presentation and the most playful use of accretion theory yet seen outside of the world of dubious PhD bids, *Solar* is also a testament to game design at its most poised, and its most mature.



Q&A: MATTHEW REYNOLDS

Game: **Text Zedventure**
Company: **Crazyreyn**

What kind of programming experience did you have before you made *Text Zedventure*?
I had no programming experience whatsoever, which I suppose made developing a game for XBLIG a strange choice, especially when there are plenty of options out there for codeless game development. I stumbled upon a game state tutorial, picked up other snippets of code and slowly evolved it into a Choose Your Own Adventure-style game. I love the idea of multiple paths and endings in games, so being able to construct something like that was great fun.

It was a project I could have probably done through Flash or other means, but having a game playable on a home console, and downloadable through Xbox Live, was the perfect incentive to learn the basics and develop something. And the fact that it is technically published makes it feel as if I've actually developed a proper game, which is a great feeling.

Was it challenging to resurrect such an elderly genre?
Working with just text was liberating from a design perspective, since you can create an entire room or situation with just a few sentences, allowing me to get on with creating scenarios rather than figuring out how to bring them to life. It's ideal for someone who was new to programming. There was a huge priority placed on sounds – I spent a good month at the end of the project finding high-quality sounds and then learning what worked in the game – which again was important when you don't have visuals.

SLEEPWALKER

Developer: **Debreuil Digital**
Price: **80MP**

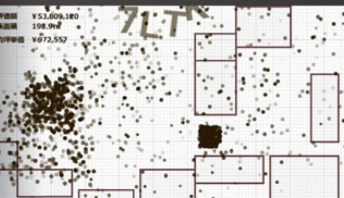


Loosely inspired by the Amiga game of the same name, *Sleepwalker* is a puzzle-platformer built around a deviously simple conceit: while you can change your cartoon somnambulist's direction with the press of a button, you can't stop him moving. What follows is an elegant lesson in escalation, as the designers layer in the gimmicks – ranging from switches and roving platforms to more complex pieces of machinery – seemingly without running out of inspiration.

Indirect control, as ever, makes for a tense game, as you find yourself circling your sleepwalker while you wait for the solution to a particularly taxing level to take shape. The puzzles yield deftly to logic, however, and while visually *Sleepwalker* is blandly consistent at best, its cold and calculating heart makes it one of the more satisfying XBLIG titles to see through to completion. Balancing frustration and enjoyment with real poise, this pyjama-clad brainteaser is both charming and astute.

MADRISM

Developer: **Tech Arts 3D**
Price: **80MP**



Tech Arts 3D may be more familiar to fans of tacky grot like *3D Custom Girl*, but with *Madrism* the Japanese developer has come up with something entirely out of character: a fast-paced architect 'em up that has players flinging together frantic floor plans before they run out of space, bolting on kitchens and toilets to complete designs, thus freeing up the room needed for the next rush of schematics.

Set against a graph-paper backdrop, *Madrism* has a quietly stylish appeal to balance out the intense speed of the game itself, and if you can overcome the bewildering pace of your first few rounds – and the near absence of much in the way of a tutorial – you're likely to find a surprisingly imaginative puzzler just itching to get under your skin. Both modest and bafflingly strange at the same time, *Madrism* proves innovation and experimentation don't always turn up daubed in bright colours.

DYSNOMIA

Developer: **Team Mango**
Price: **240MP**

If you wondered how *Doom* would play if its genes were spliced with *Gauntlet*'s, *Dysnomia* may contain your answer. A top-down sci-fi dungeon crawler with twin-stick controls and a range of pickups and weapons to scavenge, Team Mango's arcade game dumps you on a grim alien world and asks you to join the dots in a simple mystery narrative, while blasting away at all manner of alien life and solving a range of simple geographical puzzles.

It's ugly, but charmingly so: a throbbing botch of boulder browns and rust reds that almost seems to satirise the colour schemes of other, more complicated games. And the enemies, although bland while alive, are reassuringly willing to explode into large puddles of claret after a few bullets have been fired. As a shooter, this is hectic and fun, particularly in twoplayer co-op. As a blend of genres it's both ambitious and intriguing.

BREATH OF DEATH VII

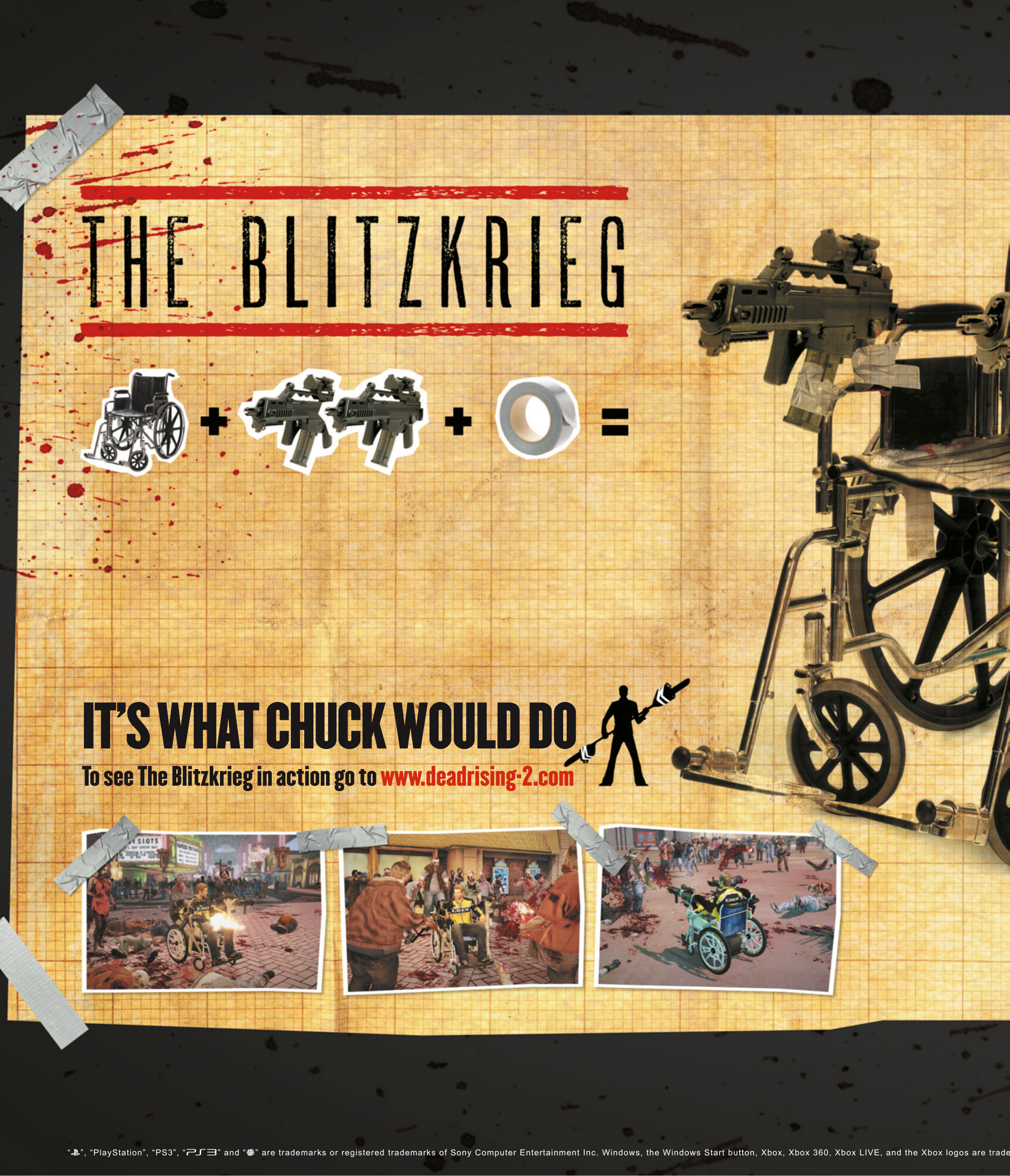
Developer: **Zeboyd**
Price: **80MP**





Breath Of Death VII isn't as cloyingly ironic as its title and art style suggest. While Zeboyd Entertainment has set out to parody the earnest 16bit RPG genre, it's managed to encapsulate most of the elements that made those games so appealing in the first place.

Playing as a skeletal protagonist, you're thrown into a surprisingly roomy adventure filled with genre staples such as an overworld map, bone-rattling dungeons and NPC-clogged towns to explore. The levelling curve is brisk but enthralling, and combat, while presented in the simple *Dragon Quest* style, is deep and tactical. Random encounters are limited, dialogue and exposition are fairly charming, and there's more adventuring to be had here than you might suspect.


THE BLITZKRIEG
+ + =
IT'S WHAT CHUCK WOULD DO
To see The Blitzkrieg in action go to www.deadrising-2.com

An audience with…

Eric Caen

Interplay's president discusses a 30-year career in gaming, and his plans to take Fallout online

Eric Caen may not have one of the best-known faces in today's videogame industry, but as the co-founder of Titus Interactive, his three decades making videogames have been colourful, resulting in oddball classics like *Titus The Fox* and memorable disasters such as *Superman 64*. Now president of Interplay, he talks to us to pick over his career and give an update on the state of his company's ongoing legal battle with Bethesda over the rights to *Fallout Online*.

You've been in the industry for 30 years, but how did you get started?
My first game was published when I was 14. I've done so many different jobs in this industry in that time. Ten years ago, I was the head of Titus Interactive, including Interplay and Virgin Interactive. Altogether, that was about 1,000 people. In France, many of the people I trained are still within the industry. For years, we were very good at training people. I think training isn't that easy these days. Now you can have a very good education, and the education will give you enough skills to enter the industry, but you'll then be stuck in the same position for 20 years.

Do you think that's down to the complexity of modern game development?
Thirty years ago what you needed was some personal motivation and a good book about assembly code. With that, you were on your way to create your first game, and you could do it in a couple of months. Now you can't really do that – except on iPhone.

What can you remember about the first game you made?
Octopus was a Game & Watch game by Nintendo that I loved. My father brought home a Commodore 3032 – a business machine; no graphics. So I thought, OK, can I find a way to recreate *Octopus* on this machine? I banged my head on the wall many times, but I eventually succeeded. I had one sound effect, and every graphic was a square, a cross, or a circle. I showed that to a shop in Paris which was publishing games. I didn't have a contract, and I sold 1,000 copies. I was so happy. My father was an engineer. He said, "If Eric is into that, I will feed him with more machines." He bought a very early Apple II and an Oric-1 [an 8bit ZX Spectrum competitor]. I became a fan of the Oric and did many games on it. It was very inexpensive and was quite powerful and we had fun with it. I developed around me a group of friends. We were working together to understand the machine and to push it to its limits. I had a neighbour who was younger than me and was a good artist: he drew characters on gridded paper, and I converted that into code. We had no tools. I was into this so much I totally missed out on school. I was kicked out of school at 18. My parents were desperate, but my father said, "If he's good at making videogames, why not?" So I started my company when I was 19.

> "I was so into videogames that I totally missed out on school. I was kicked out at 18. So I started my own company when I was 19"

As a teenager, what did your approach to game design look like?
You don't know you're a game designer at that age, that's the first thing. At that time, the limitations were ridiculous. Each character could have three positions. The AI was limited to a hero onscreen and another character. But what should that other character do? What to display onscreen? What kind of AI should we use? That still took me months.

What was the first game you made that you really liked?
I would have to say *Crazy Cars*. I saw *OutRun* at the arcade, and the Amiga was just out. I had no money, so I borrowed money from my parents to buy an Amiga. My father said, "OK, but it's not for playing on!" My father was always scared I'd spend too much time playing and not enough time learning. The Amiga was new to me and was pretty hard to understand. I got the hang of it, though, and we released *Crazy Cars* in 1987, and it sold a quarter of a million units.

So you're thrown out of school and your parents are disappointed. How did you get to the point of thinking about forming a videogame company?
I was just over 18, at home, programming games. I prepared a resumé, but what kind of resumé can you have at that age? I sent my resumé to 24 French companies, and I got 19 calls within ten days. My brother, who is four years older than me, said, "OK, you're a jerk,



Caen's 30 years in the industry have taken him from hobbyist coding to boardroom wranglings. Nowadays, as well as pushing forward with the production of *Fallout Online*, he's looking to take Interplay's IP to platforms such as Facebook and iPhone

and you send this empty resumé to 24 companies, and 19 companies are getting back to you? It means there is a big demand for your skills!" He asked if I had friends like me, and I did, so he said maybe we could put together a company to make games for publishers. We were profitable in year one; in 1986 we already had 30 people. Just because we were working for every existing company at that time. We said, "Either we grow, and that means hiring more people and getting to understand things like HR, or we should use this money we're making to fund our own games." That's why we started working on *Crazy Cars*.

bought the rights to the Blues Brothers. Once that game was ready, I was clever enough to have full-screen scrolling without the additional hardware that was in the cartridge that was meant to be the only way to do that. We tried to sell that to many publishers. No serious interest. And we went back to Nintendo and said, "Look, we did this," and Nintendo said, "It's impossible. Nobody can do scrolling without the extra hardware." But they looked at it, and they were convinced. They asked if we were sure we wanted to publish our own games, and we bought the cartridges, and there we were on a platform with practically no piracy.

> "Quality-orientated and not money-orientated can't work in this industry. If nobody is looking after the budget, eventually you'll be in trouble"

What were your big influences back then?
We were influenced by movies and by the games coming from Japan: we loved that freedom to create things that looked strange but were very addictive. We also built games based on our existing tech. We did four or five games based on the *Crazy Cars* engine, for example.

Then we got very impressed by the games consoles. We saw the NES and we wanted to jump in – same thing with the Sega Master System. Our main motivation was piracy. We were making three to five games a year, and they were hacked in a week. When consoles arrived, we went to see Nintendo, and they said, "No, you're not strong enough to be a publisher. Do your development, and then sell that to a publisher." But we were tricky: we went to see Broadway Video, the developers of Saturday Night Live, and we

What was it like being a big player in Europe during the '90s?
We moved away from Europe pretty quickly. We bought Palace Software, a fantastic IP creator with games like *Barbarian* [see p106]. We started our American operation in 1988. We started to think: let's not try to please the European audience, but the American audience. It's so big that if we have a hit in the US, it will fund all our mistakes across the world.

How did you go from running Titus to heading up Interplay?
In 1994, we were completely broke. Inventory and marketing are so expensive that you need a lot of capital to be serious in this business. In '95 we almost sold the company to Infogrames. We signed our documents; they never signed theirs. I think the founders thought that we would not be motivated to work with them. We needed money, and we heard that a new compartment of the stock exchange would open in 1996, looking for hi-tech companies. We were listed in spring '96 and our unique objective was to raise money to acquire properties and grow.

I wasn't in charge of Interplay at first. It was my brother, Hervé. Those first years were very complex. In 2001, Brian Fargo, the founder, decided to leave. That was good and bad: he wasn't good at managing budgets, but he was the spirit of the company. He was so quality-orientated and not money-orientated – this can't work in the videogame industry. If you're only creative, if nobody is looking after the budget, eventually you'll be in trouble.

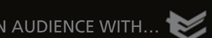
Fargo was very good at creating great IPs. He left in 2001 when the company was 700 people. It went down to two people – but two people sitting on a pile of IPs. In 2005, Hervé started negotiations with Bethesda to sell *Fallout* to them. My brother said: "If you want the full IP, the value of it is $50 million." They said: "No way. Why $50 million?" We said: "Because the MMOG strength of this universe is huge." Bethesda said: "We don't want that. Let's buy everything else but the MMOG. Do the MMOG." They said that Interplay had to start development and by a certain time we had to have a full game in development. All this information is public.

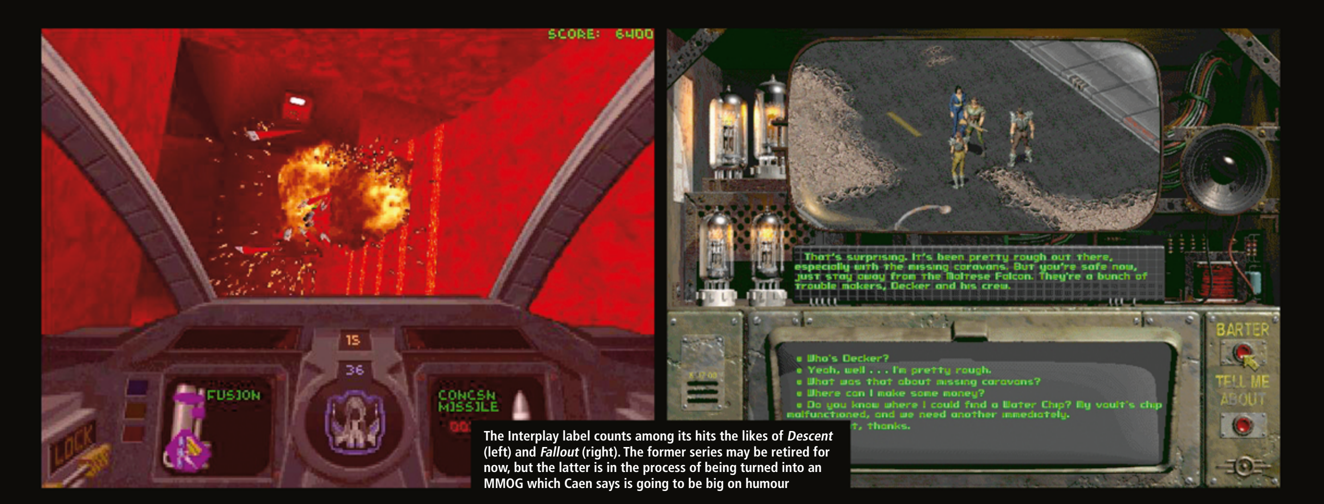
Bethesda bought everything except for the MMOG?
They bought everything, but left Interplay with the licence to do the MMOG – under certain conditions, thinking that Interplay would never fulfil these conditions. But Interplay did. Spring 2009 – this is public information – Bethesda sends a termination letter to Interplay, saying: "You did not fulfil your obligation." But Interplay did. So all the litigation is about that.

So the clause was that you had to have people working on the game?



Caen's career encapsulates *Superman 64* (left), often referenced as one of the worst high-profile games ever made, but also the likes of the visually pioneering *Clayfighter* (right), one of a number of IPs under his control as Interplay president





The Interplay label counts among its hits the likes of *Descent* (left) and *Fallout* (right). The former series may be retired for now, but the latter is in the process of being turned into an MMOG which Caen says is going to be big on humour

Yes, so my brother rehired some of the original writers. Chris Taylor rejoined Interplay in 2007 and wrote an amazing design for *Fallout Online*. Then, at the end of 2008, we found a good partnership with Masthead Studio in Bulgaria. They have been working for five years on their own MMOG engine. For them, it's like trying to be visible on the App Store: without IP, it's hard.

But *Fallout* has everything to be successful. I think Bethesda, off the back of *Fallout 3*'s success, realised that Hervé was probably right about the value. They said: "OK, how can we get that without paying?" This year, we opened Falloutonline.com. We don't want to show too much for two reasons. One: we still have two years to go; and two: anything we show will help Bethesda in their fight. It's a unique experience to start marketing by showing so little. The server almost blew up in June because so many people registered.

So *Fallout Online* is definitely in development at the moment?
I can't say too much. What I can say is that everyone who is registered is getting a newsletter every five or six weeks. The content is not a typical newsletter with a lot of technical information; it's letters from NPCs inside the game, writing to other NPCs about what they're experiencing. We're giving a lot of hints about the future of the game. We have a beta scheduled for 2012, with the commercial launch in the second half of 2012.

But there's genuinely production under way at Masthead?
Yes. We have 90 people working on it. Even in January 2009, you were already able to move across the world.

Are you interested in how Bethesda has approached the *Fallout* universe?
I can't comment too much on this, as it's close to our litigation. What I can say is that of course we're playing what Bethesda is doing. We appreciate some portions of it, and we're not necessarily fans of everything. I think they miss a lot of the humour, and the fans seem to agree with that. *Fallout 3* was a little bit too serious – that's definitely not where we're going. Our *Fallout* MMOG will be extremely funny. At the same time, an MMOG must be a lot deeper than a standalone game. It's not a shooting game we're making. You can shoot, but it's a very small portion of the game. The game itself is about reconstructing the world. What is unique about our project is how we're trying to get it into many communication systems. This is a big problem for *World Of Warcraft*, because the fantasy universe is not compatible with modern communication systems. It would be odd to receive an SMS from a troll. But in a post-apocalyptic world…

Interplay's very lean now, so how much of a risk is having 90 development staff?
Our plan is to have a million subscribers. The challenge is high, but we've developed an ecosystem of developers that is pretty new: they invest and then we share revenue. I took this model of real partnerships to other developers, and said that we own so many IPs: *MDK*, *Battle Chess*. Interplay will be the publisher, they make the game, and we share the revenue. We also bring our expertise of what the game should be. It's a constructive expertise. We now have 12 SKUs under development. No other publishers do this. Our philosophy is that we're in the same situation that Marvel was in ten years ago. They were completely broke, but they were sitting on fantastic IPs. They lent *Spider-Man* to Columbia Tri-Star and made hits, and then Disney buys them for several billion. It's exactly what we're doing now. Imagine the value of our IPs: *Earthworm Jim*, *MDK*, *Messiah*, *Kingpin*. All these are owned by Interplay. At the moment we're working on games for DSiWare, WiiWare, iPhone, iPad, Android – some of our IPs will arrive on Facebook in 2011, with social ways to play these games.

Lots of developers have flocked to iPhone and Facebook, but simply publishing on these platforms is no kind of guarantee.
It's not automatic that you'll make money. It's an open platform. It's freedom. *Angry Birds* is a good example: they made a fortune with something simple. But people say, "It's because of the birds or the pigs." No, idiot: it's the dynamic physics. At the moment, to be visible on these platforms, you need something that will be an instant addiction.

And you get more stuff for free as a player. If I have to be negative about something in this industry, it's that manufacturers over-exploited the fact that to try a game you have to buy it. People have been screwed so many times buying stupid games. That was a very bad call by the manufacturers. Some of these manufacturers still haven't understood that Apple will kill them very soon. If you're a lonely developer somewhere and you want to do a game on PSN or XBLA, you probably have a five per cent chance to be accepted. This is stupid. It's fascism. They should say, "All of you come and stay with us: don't go to Facebook or Apple." Nintendo have IPs that are strong enough. Microsoft has a lot of money. Sony? I don't see where the strategy is going right now.

Looking back over your career, what was the most exciting period?
I think the experiences I had with my friends creating games for the Oric. And now it's back. If I was 18 again, I'd forget about Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo, and go straight for the iPod – there are very few limits to your creativity. If you stick with "I love this game – I will copy it," though, you have no chance. I learnt that with *Octopus* back at the start. To make it big you have to amaze people.



Illustration: Junkboy

THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

ONCE DEFINED BY TWIN-STICK SHOOTERS AND ARCADE REMAKES, TODAY'S DOWNLOADABLE CONSOLE TITLES ARE RIPPING UP THE MANUAL AS GAME DEVELOPMENT ENTERS A NEW AGE

For **Tim Schafer**, it all began with 'amnesia fortnights'. "I got the idea from Wong Kar-wai, the movie director," says the founder of Double Fine Productions. "He was making an epic film with swords and armies that took three years to finish. Everyone was getting lost in the project, so he went to Hong Kong and improvised for two weeks, just his stars and his cameraman. They made two movies in those two weeks. Games take three or four years to make, and it's such a long time to live with one creative idea. So during *Brütal Legend* we had an 'amnesia fortnight' where we forgot what we were working on. We split the company up into four groups, and each group made a game in 14 days. It was a huge morale boost."

Schafer isn't the only person turning to smaller games for something they aren't getting from the traditional retail experience any more. The market for quirky, digitally distributed titles is changing quickly at the moment. Such flexibility has long been a feature of the PC landscape, certainly, but now Xbox Live, PSN and WiiWare channels are filling up with games of sufficient size and quality to blur the lines between the original vision of what an arcade download should look like and big-budget boxed releases.

On consoles, then, titles such as *Deathspank* and *Shadow Complex* – not to mention Double Fine's Halloween RPG *Costume Quest* (see p101) – are helping to define a new marketplace. These so-called premium download games are meeting with success, too. *Lara Croft And The Guardian Of Light*, the sprightly reinvention of Eidos' best-selling *Tomb Raider* franchise, has a higher Metacritic rating than any other *Tomb Raider* recorded on the site, while RedLynx recently announced that *Trials HD*, its pared-down OCD motorcycle platformer, has sold over a million copies on XBLA, and Capcom has seen *Dead Rising 2: Case 0* enjoying 500,000 paid downloads in just under a month.

Such statistics may not be telling the whole story, of course – *Trials* took over a year to crack that figure, while *Case 0* is effectively a large demo with an aggressive price point and a handful of Gamerpoints thrown in to sweeten the deal. That said, with more and more

LORD OF CHAOS

"Back when we were making *Monkey Island*, that game took nine months to make," remembers Schafer when asked about the flexibility available when designing premium downloads. "Even then we were open to new ideas until the very end. We weren't doing 3D or voice, so we could be really flexible. For smaller games, you still have some of that ability today: they're more simple, and there's not as much chaos. Every feature and every person on your team introduces a certain percentage of chaos and that just adds up until you're behind. There's a lot of risk. With smaller games, you can get your arms around it. You can have a team that meets every day, which is a huge communications boost. It lets you come up with ideas for features and you know you can get them in. That's impossible with bigger teams. It's much easier to have a unified vision for the game."

studios aiming their games at consoles' digital platforms – and with the Xbox Live Arcade moniker in particular starting to look increasingly inaccurate – what does the emergence of the premium download game mean for developers and their audiences? And what, exactly, is driving this new trend?

As far as Double Fine is concerned, the team ultimately had no choice: *Brütal Legend 2*, its next retail release, was cancelled while in pre-production. Stuck with a large payroll to meet, Schafer leapt into the process of pitching the 'amnesia' games instead. "We didn't have anything else, so we polished the demos up and took them on the road," he remembers. "And, actually, it turned out great. Instead of having this one game, with that desperation of, 'We're going to go out of business unless you publish this,' which is not necessarily exciting to a publisher, we had four titles for people to see. We actually ended up with multiple offers on projects. It takes the pressure off because it means you always have a bit of money coming in."

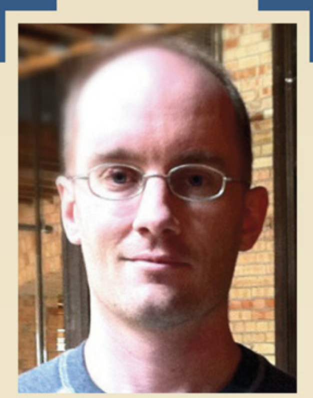
Even developers that haven't had big games cancelled will still admit that a large part of the appeal of premium downloads is the challenging conditions of the current retail marketplace. "Publishers are making bigger bets on a smaller pool of companies now," says **Vlad Ceraldi**, CEO of Hothead Games, the producer of *Deathspank* and the *Penny Arcade* RPGs. "If you're a company that's just finished a $25m project, you really need another one right away, and there aren't a lot out there. With 15 people, we can find a deal to keep going. Smaller bets, more choices: our way of doing things might actually be more viable than traditional development is now."

"IF YOU'RE A COMPANY THAT'S JUST FINISHED A $25M PROJECT, YOU REALLY NEED ANOTHER ONE RIGHT AWAY, AND THERE AREN'T A LOT OUT THERE. OUR WAY OF DOING THINGS MIGHT BE MORE VIABLE"

The first studio to truly capitalise on the new possibilities opening up for console developers was Chair Entertainment. With *Shadow Complex*, the Utah-based team gambled on both the ever-loosening download size restrictions on platforms like XBLA and the increasingly eclectic tastes of their audiences in order to deliver something unique: an old-fashioned side-scrolling exploration title built with modern tools in the form of Unreal Engine 3. "We were initially looking at the emerging downloadable stage with our first game, *Undertow*," explains co-founder **Donald Mustard**. "We were seeing a lot of games like *Tetris* or *Pac-Man* – something more traditionally arcadey. We thought there was a real opportunity to make games for this space that were far more elaborate than that, but were of genres that were still not considered viable for a $60 retail game. *Shadow Complex*, which is basically 2D – we thought the retail space just wouldn't support a title like that. But the downloadable space seemed like the perfect arena for it. We were just looking at the kind of game we wanted to make and picking the right market."

For Ceraldi, premium downloads have a similar appeal: they provide established developers with a chance to have much more control over their own projects. "Hothead was about wanting to create fresh new ideas after making games about other people's ideas," he says. "I worked on Hulk games and The Simpsons games and enjoyed it, but we wanted to do something new. Retail space is still a great way to get games to people, but the cost and the number of hoops you need to jump through to get there limits the kind of thing you might create. Our

Whether you view it as a paid demo or not, *Case 0*'s success on XBLA sends a signal that major publishers are starting to pay attention to premium downloads. Other franchises have downloadable instalments planned, too





Donald (above) and Geremy (top) Mustard worked on boxed projects like *Advent Rising* before turning their attention to the downloadable space with *Undertow*









Costume Quest (above) sees Double Fine build a title around a very American holiday. *Clash Of Heroes* (top), may prove more at home on consoles than on handheld, with lavish cartoon art and a deep puzzle mechanic



Shadow Complex is both an invitation and a word of warning to any developer hoping to make money on XBLA. While the game was a huge success, its ingenious maps, satisfying upgrades and attention to detail mean it's a tough act to follow

Q&A: ANTTI ILVESSUO

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, REDLYNX



As the creative director of RedLynx, the small Finnish team that has created one of the few million-selling XBLA games, Antti Ilvessuo (right) could be considered an expert on the premium download marketplace. We caught up with him to discuss the success of *Trials HD* and what other studios can learn from it.

How did RedLynx end up selling on XBLA?
We've been an independent studio for over ten years now and have published and developed more than 100 games. While some of those were traditional retail games, and some were even million-dollar projects that took a couple of years to create, many more were smaller, online interactive games, in all kinds of genres and with many different game mechanics. That gave us a really good understanding of the online market some time ago, and has helped us understand what players respond to. Generally, they want to start playing right away, they like shorter sessions, and of course they are drawn to polished, proven mechanics that keep them glued to the screens while their social lives disintegrate. To stay up front, we're always rethinking how we do things. We try to keep in mind the players. How did they hear about our games? How do they play through the demo? How easy is it to buy? How long does it stay on their hard drive? Do they tell their friends about it? In the end, you have to think as a gamer.

What do you think made *Trials HD* stand out so much on XBLA?
The support from the Xbox Live folks, such as the Summer of Arcade promotion, has been a crucial part of our success and their enthusiasm for *Trials HD* has been strong and continuous. But even with that, we've done everything in our power too. We are deeply involved with our fans, with tournaments, forums and other things.

Is the download gaming market changing?
There should always be a market for mid-size games. So long as we as game developers keep the bar raised high, people are going to be happy and downloadable games will continue to thrive. There will always be space if you create good stuff. The Live Arcade folks do a great job acting as a gatekeeper. They space the releases out carefully, which is a marked difference from the retail environment, where suddenly you have to have £5,000 to buy all the big releases in November and December. They also keep the number of games reasonable and the quality high – you don't have to wade through 500 fart apps to find *Trials HD*.

budgets have to be less, of course, but you're not thinking about manufacturing, logistics, returns, resale. There's no used market to compete against, so you can target 200,000 units instead of several million. There's no way we could have made a retail *Penny Arcade* game. No way. Digital distribution makes it easier to get to these ideas that would never make it in terms of physical media. It allows smaller companies to self-publish and bring games to the market more affordably. It democratises development."

"We like to make games that are unusual and that's always risky for a publisher," agrees Schafer. "Alongside *Costume Quest*, we have three other games in development now. They're very different and they all reflect the different characters of the teams: different approaches to storytelling and design. We've got our first female lead in one, for example. It's a good opportunity for different voices to get out there, and I've always very strongly believed that each game you make should have its own personal stamp on it. If games go through enough of a committee, they feel like they could have been made anywhere, by anyone. With $30m budgets, no one wants to hear about risk; these kind of budgets we're looking at now mitigate that risk."

Mustard argues that, risk aside, even the limitations imposed by making premium downloads rather than retail games might be good for developers. "The best thing these kind of games taught us was to strip your game down to its most basic elements that make it fun," he suggests. "We literally had to choose between having this animation or this sound. It causes you to work really hard to communicate to the player how the game is fun. We took those lessons into *Shadow Complex*, and we'd take them into any game we make in the future. We're now constantly saying: 'What has to be there? Let's strip this down to the bare minimum of what is required to make it great.' It's so easy to lose focus when you can do anything."

And established studios can benefit from this kind of approach just as readily as smaller teams, apparently. "We see this as the option to do our equivalent of Pixar shorts," says **Darrell Gallagher**, the



Q&A: NATHAN VELLA

CO-FOUNDER, CAPYBARA GAMES

Despite a solid licence and near-universal praise from reviewers, Capybara Games' puzzle RPG *Might And Magic: Clash of Heroes* struggled to make much of an impact on DS. Nathan Vella (right), studio co-founder, explains why the game is now headed to PSN and XBLA.



At Develop this year, Greg Zeschuk from BioWare said that traditional triple-A game development is too risky for most studios. Do you think that's true?
From Capy's standpoint, the console retail market just requires too much. Too many resources, too much money, too much marketing, too much time. I may love playing *Uncharted 2* or *Super Street Fighter IV*, but I don't think I want our studio to make them.

What made you decide to take *Clash Of Heroes* from handheld to console?
We actually started *Clash Of Heroes HD* before the DS version even launched – we rolled right off one version and on to the next. When the game was nearing gold, everyone at Capy and Ubisoft had the feeling we'd made a pretty good game. At the same time, we knew the DS market was highly competitive. In a lot of ways, it was a difficult decision for us – we always want to be working on new, fresh ideas and different games. We didn't want to port. But when it came down too it, we were very proud of the game we had made, and couldn't see another studio doing the XBLA/PSN version with as much love as we could. We decided to take the chance to really add to the game, balance the game, bring more to the game, and that's the main reason why we jumped right on it.

Why do you think downloadable games are getting so much more ambitious on consoles?
I think it's important to keep two things in mind: fulfilment and expectation. Some of the most satisfying and fulfilling games I have played over the past three years have been small, downloadable titles. Their play time or 'scope' didn't really mean a thing to me because the games were just that good, that 'complete'.

Conversely, I think different genres and styles of games come with expectations attached. You simply cannot make a four-hour RPG. RPG fans come to the genre for an experience, and that experience involves delving into the game. You need lots of content for that. On the flipside, a puzzler, or platformer, or shooter does not have the same expectations attached – they can be shorter without breaking player expectations at all. With that in mind, I think we're starting to see some meatier games on the downloadable platforms because the platforms have been proven as viable – gamers buy games from XBLA and PSN, big or small. All in all, I think digital services afford developers the room to make 'complete' experiences, whether that means four hours or 20 hours.



GM of Crystal Dynamics, whose latest Lara Croft game eschews complex exploration for far more immediate pleasures. "In those short films Pixar really has the chance to try something new without the weight of expectations that comes with a big film. We felt there was a similar kind of freedom for Lara in the digital space, so we picked a few things we wanted to try, with co-op being the top one. There's just more room to experiment in general with download games, and we wanted to take bolder steps with the franchise.

"The feedback loop between download games and our pillar releases is not just in terms of gameplay ideas, either. One of the things that was appealing about the Pixar model is that they were using techniques in the short films that they were going to apply to their next major film. They tried fur in a short before Monsters Inc, and water before Finding Nemo. They also try out new teams and new directors. I felt that the digital space allowed us the opportunity to do that, too. There were all these things we were interested in trying and this gave us a chance to see how they were received."

Gallagher believes that Lara Croft won't be the last major videogame figure to be making her presence felt in the premium download space. "There's definitely a movement there," he suggests. "A lot of other publishers will be looking at what we've done and emulating it. With stuff like *Dead Space Extraction* and the *Red Faction* guys announcing things, there are already other people wanting to experiment as we did, and that's only going to grow."

It already is, in fact. "We used to have the whole premium download playground," sighs Ceraldi. "Now Capcom's there, Ubisoft's there, EA's looking at this space. We're with EA Partners and it's fantastic for us – we make a bigger project, we retain the IP, they publish, and we do everything else. There's still room, even with the big publishers moving in, for interesting deals, in other words. But it's definitely harder for indies to get on to these channels already, and that's because the market's shifting so rapidly."



And, as the influx continues, many former retail developers are discovering that the shift to premium downloads isn't necessarily as simple as it sounds. "If a studio is geared to making boxed, retail games, the transition can be a difficult one," says **Antti Ilvessuo**, the creative director of RedLynx, the studio behind *Trials HD*. "The games have to be made about two to three times more quickly, and the team has to consist of fewer people doing more things. Many of our employees have been working on the same team for eight years or more, turning them into super-effective, multi-limbed hive minds. So your option would be to build teams like that, or go out and try to hire mutated octopus-men, who have eight arms and two brains each."

"We have a lot of confidence, but we wouldn't be able to jump into Facebook and make money," says Ceraldi. "There are different rules, different audiences, different expectations, and the same thing applies to downloadables. A lot of companies think it's just bits, and it's a digital storefront rather than a brick storefront. It's not. The budgets are different. The risk factors are different. Even the marketing is different: packaging, size, where you spend your money. We see pitches from companies that used to go retail, and now they're trying to do premium downloadable and they're trying to get $4m for a game. There might be one deal like that out there. They say they can't make a game for 200,000 units; 'We pay people X, we have X overhead, and we're structured differently.' You have to realise how to change your company to fit the current opportunity. And there are all these

"I'M NOT SURE WHAT YOU'D CALL CASE 0 – IT'S NOT A DEMO, BUT IT'S STILL THERE TO PROMOTE THE SALE OF A BIG RETAIL GAME. THERE'S A LOT OF THAT GOING ON, AND IT'S NOT NECESSARILY POSITIVE"







Lara Croft And The Guardian Of Light (top) and *Trials HD* (above) emphasise the power of production values in this market, where slick, accessible demos make a difference



"Officially it's 'premium downloadable,'" says *Deathspank* dev Ceraldi. "But we jokingly call them 'double-A'. It's a triple-A game in a smaller package"

barriers in place. For whatever reason, if you charge more than $15 on XBLA, you're going to get killed. I don't understand it, but it's still something you have to take into account."

"So there's still a lot of things that have to shake down in this market," concludes Ceraldi. "Under the current model, there's only so many Wednesdays and only so many games platform holders will release on any Wednesday. So you hang on to these slots for dear life, and it's not an open network. If you're a big publisher, you're going to be able to barter for those slots a lot better. Then there's the other channels. How does Games On Demand sit with XBLA? Where does the Indie Games channel fit in? Microsoft is trying to create spaces, and so is Sony, but everyone has their own approach to these things. You're seeing that with the kind of games you get. You're seeing premium games like *Deathspank* that feel like whole games, and then you're seeing Capcom release *Dead Rising 2: Case 0*. I'm not sure what you'd call it – it's not a demo, but it's still there to promote the sale of their big retail game. There's a lot of that going on, and it's not necessarily positive. There's still a limited shelf life, and these channels are getting clogged up pretty quickly now. That said, this summer, with *Limbo*, *Lara Croft*, and everything else? This is undeniably the golden age for premium, where you see a lot of new ideas that have never been done before. That's where we are right now."







"When we started in 2006, we estimated the downloadable market to be quite a bit bigger than it actually was," says Vlad Ceraldi (left). It's grown, however, as Tim Schafer (centre) and Darrell Gallagher (right) would attest

Mustard, however, suspects that ultimately there will cease to be too much of a distinction between the marketplaces, whether developers are working on big-budget titles, premium downloads, or far more modest arcade games. "My hope is that the line gets blurred even more in the end. I always thought I'd be the person who always had to have the CD case. I don't need that any more, and I'm starting to feel that way about games as well. There's something really awesome about turning on the Xbox and the game is right there. As consumers get more comfortable with that, the market will be too. I think you'll see a lot more experimentation. I think smaller games like *Pac-Man CE* will still thrive in this area, but they'll be alongside games like *Shadow Complex* too. I hope some day someone is risky enough to make a full-on FPS that's just as polished as *Halo*, but is an hour-and-a-half long and $15."

"Just see the influence Netflix has had on the DVD market," observes Chair co-founder, and Donald's brother, **Geremy Mustard**. "That's a market that really liked physical media, and they're now really comfortable with streaming over the internet. We're a transition generation, and the next doesn't even like owning physical things. They're more comfortable with bits, and we'll all be like that pretty soon. It's exciting to be at the start of all this."

RIGHT AND RON

Everyone agrees that smaller budgets allow for quirkier ideas, but it's worth getting a sense of how a premium download might look if it had to go through traditional retail channels. According to Ceraldi, *Deathspank* is a case in point: "It probably wouldn't have existed. A lot of publishers had said no to Ron Gilbert. We said yes. This idea, a blend of *Monkey Island* and *Diablo*, bringing that old spirit back and making it relevant – publishers said no, because they have to sell two million units to make sense. Then people would have wanted to add co-op, multiplayer, and the whole thing loses its focus."

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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

StarCraft II



We know – three months in a row. That's testament to Blizzard's brilliant matchmaking, leagues that keep you riveted, and opponents that are continually surprising.
PC, ACTIVISION BLIZZARD

Carcassone



A friendly inter-office game became a riot of roads, ruins and backstabbing. There's nothing like a sneaky farmer to push you across the winning line.
IPHONE, THE CODING MONKEYS

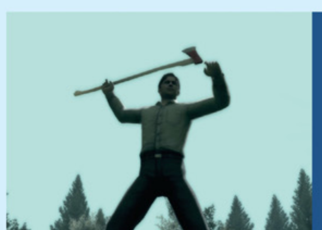
Civilization V



Sid, we've missed you. Early forays have seen Alexander humbled, Elizabeth I and her bothersome York flattened, and that dastardly Turk Suleiman forced to his knees.
PC, FIRAXIS

Copying the cult master

When movie-inspired games wander off the path



If nothing else, *Deadly Premonition* proves that, regardless of whether you think games should be aping cinema at all, there's a wealth of cinematic inspirations beyond gaming's usual chief influence, the Hollywood blockbuster

The film/videogame debate just won't lie down. In the past six months, the likes of *Alan Wake* and *Heavy Rain* have made the arguments even more worn than David Cage's HBO collection. While both games managed to simulate some aspects of their inspiration, it doesn't look like either has founded a new future for the interactive narrative.

And neither will Access Games' *Deadly Premonition*. But its irregular storytelling, bizarre approach to character, and subversive, tangential dialogue has achieved one thing: transforming a minor title from an obscure Japanese developer into a major draw for an underground audience. It's a cult hit.

Partly, that's because director Hidetaka Suehiro's hidden messages and underlying themes are 'borrowed' straight from the work of David Lynch. The unkind would accuse it of plagiarism, but at its best, *Deadly Premonition*'s rigidly linear narrative and nightmarish hallway shooting galleries recreate brilliantly the confusion and sense of inferiority that's familiar to any Lynch viewer.

A copy vindicates its inspiration, certifying it as something worthy of flattery – and *Deadly Premonition* is a copy. It's something that would never pass a focus group or even the planning stage at most studios – a vision born of a director and dev team forging ahead in a market obsessed with producing games digestible by ever-wider audiences.

In comparison, it makes even a game like *Vanquish* feel by-the-numbers – an experience designed explicitly to appeal to western players. Platinum's game is an enjoyable one, and technically it's from a different universe, but in terms of the experience it feels more familiar, and much more like what you expected.

It wasn't marketing that produced *Deadly Premonition*'s cult status. That's not how gaining cult status works. Access' game got there on its own. It's a mechanically stunted production, but ambitious, too, filled with the character that comes from acute self-knowledge. It is not trying to create a new type of narrative videogame. It is not mainstream, and never could be. It illustrates just how few rough edges exist in commercial boxed productions todays – and suggests that, sometimes, such texture is part of the draw.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



VANQUISH

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** SEGA
DEVELOPER: PLATINUM GAMES **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E213, E215, E219









The bullets fly so thick and fast in *Vanquish* that you end up only paying attention to the really big ones (centre) – but when a swift escape is needed you can always boost away while casually firing back over your head (above)

Vanquish is as lean as they come. From its first motion-blurred boost to the last thumping impact, it's an adventure that rarely drops pace and doesn't bother with sidestreets. The hero, Sam Gideon, is Nathan Drake in futuristic armour, a smartass full of quips and testosterone. But he's not the star: that honour belongs to his pristine white suit.

It's a devastating tool, and its impact will be felt widely throughout the thirdperson genre. You've never moved like this before. The suit has two abilities, the primary being boost, Gideon dropping to his knees as jets of flame shoot out of the legs, propelling him forward at incredible velocity. Once boosting, Gideon can move in any direction, casually cocking his guns overhead and behind, or even lying down for a horizontal zoom-by shooting. It feels so good that, quite outside of its combat utility, it ends up the default movement option.

The suit's other ability is to slow down time, letting you pick out headshots and weakspots at leisure. Both powers are limited by a gauge that decreases with use and overheats if exhausted, leading to a cooldown during which Gideon is vulnerable. Combining and balancing these powers is the core of *Vanquish*, but learning to do it well gives the game structure.

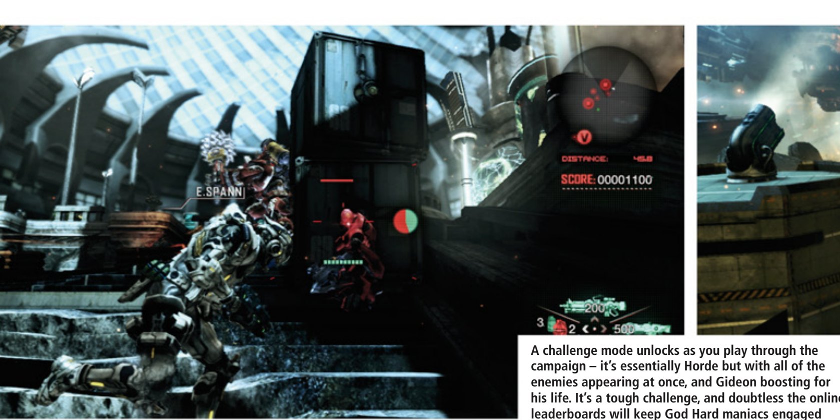
Vanquish has no suit upgrades. You don't get faster, or stronger, or gain the ability to fly. Instead, the player has to learn how to maximise Gideon's basic abilities. At first, this means conserving power, boosting from cover to cover, and rolling out while activating slow motion. But soon the enemies drastically increase in efficiency, and the old thirdperson standby of crouching in cover looking for an opportunity just doesn't work – they'll advance relentlessly, flank, and use attacks that circumvent the bolthole. You have to make your own luck.

The two abilities are enough because their interplay is so fluid, and as the game hints at new ways to use them it gives the props for Gideon to do so. Every arena feels different, even within the same level, offering up enemies in new locations and configurations. Moving across them, making the decision to engage or withdraw, becomes spontaneous – because Gideon can be anywhere in seconds, gaps become chasms begging for a slow-motion dive and a dropkick. Pinned down, a quick grenade combined with a slow-motion vault turns you into the aggressor. Hemmed in by robots, Gideon tears free with a boost before entering slow motion and casually firing a rocket backwards, pirouetting out of the move as the debris hits the floor.

Mastery isn't just rewarding, it's thrilling – and the fact that you've learned to do it, rather than being powered up, makes it all the better. *Vanquish* plays out over eight hours that increase in pace, intensity and scale – there's one section in particular where it feels like leaning on a rail might cause another skyscraper to collapse. The game



> Boosting is a devastating tool, and its impact will be felt widely throughout the thirdperson genre. You've never moved like this before



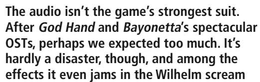


A challenge mode unlocks as you play through the campaign – it's essentially Horde but with all of the enemies appearing at once, and Gideon boosting for his life. It's a tough challenge, and doubtless the online leaderboards will keep God Hard maniacs engaged








The audio isn't the game's strongest suit. After *God Hand* and *Bayonetta*'s spectacular OSTs, perhaps we expected too much. It's hardly a disaster, though, and among the effects it even jams in the Wilhelm scream





The onscreen score isn't as big a deal as was once thought, although playing through the same section multiple times does make your mind drift towards score attack

rarely misses a beat, apart from an ill-advised escort mission, and despite its relative paucity of components never feels anything but varied in what it's demanding of the hero.

Visually, *Vanquish* is Starship Troopers meets Aliens, but narratively it's more like Space Precinct, with too many cutscenes featuring Gideon performing outlandish moves that don't exist in-game, or the comedy villain cackling on his throne. The in-game dialogue is better, and properly amusing at times, even though it's firmly rooted in dumb machismo.

Vanquish doesn't have the panache or replayability of *Bayonetta*, Platinum's previous highpoint. In fact, compared to that game its content seems meagre. The campaign ends by setting up the sequel, and the harder difficulty modes (particularly God Hard) seem overly punitive. But the comparison only goes so far: the learning curve is *Vanquish*'s greatest trick, and a deceptive one.

Maximising the suit's energy, teasing just enough power out to deal with everything, is exhilarating enough; in concert with the highpoints of spectacle and challenge, the action is elevated to another level. *Vanquish* isn't substantial enough to be a brilliant whole, but there's more than enough here to bother its western competitors. Finally, Sega can dust off that classic marketing line, because once you've played *Vanquish*, everything else seems a little bit slow. **[8]**

The instant-kill attacks of certain robots may be controversial, but we like them – they're obviously signposted, and force you to keep moving. The enforced cooldown after a melee strike, on the other hand, we could do without





Gunishment

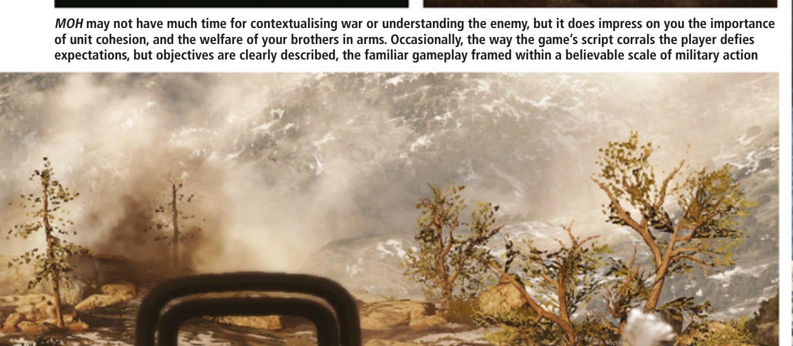


Unlike the suit, there are upgrades for Gideon's weapons, but they're not significant until accumulated in huge numbers, bringing increased ammo, steadier aim and the like. The guns are a mix of standards – assault rifle, sniper, shotgun, rocket launcher – and more original options: one fires spinning discs that arc dangerously after hitting their first target, potentially dismembering any number of bots, while another locks on to multiple targets before raining down laser beams. In truth it's not the most inspiring armoury, but it certainly does the job. And besides, the suit's the star.





MOH may not have much time for contextualising war or understanding the enemy, but it does impress on you the importance of unit cohesion, and the welfare of your brothers in arms. Occasionally, the way the game's script corrals the player defies expectations, but objectives are clearly described, the familiar gameplay framed within a believable scale of military action







MEDAL OF HONOR

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** EA
DEVELOPER: DANGER CLOSE/DICE **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E216



Unless you pull off a headshot, it takes a fair number of rounds to put someone down. This, combined with the wimpy blast radius of the grenades, seems a little at odds with the level of authenticity on offer elsewhere

People who wave placards and hold symbolic burnings are upset about *Medal Of Honor*, but they really needn't be. EA's reboot of the war-themed shooter sees the series evacuated out of World War II and redeployed into the present-day conflict in Afghanistan. Much pre-emptive fury has been directed at the prospect of playing a Taliban soldier in multiplayer – claiming offence to Our Boys. Detractors are late to that party, given that Nazis and non-specific terrorist organisations have long since been considered fair game, but the real kicker for EA is that it's made such an obvious effort to revere the soldiers the game is now accused of insulting.

In its campaign mode, *MOH* is almost a paean to the decency of US military personnel – even if it pointedly saves its admiration for the troops on the ground rather than those commanding the forces from afar. In fact, it is so keen to exonerate the soldiers themselves, who all operate with the utmost virtue, that it comes across with the forceful naivety of propaganda. This is not the sort of war in which US air support blithely shreds civilian vehicles or in which US troops keep as mementos body parts of murdered Afghans. And by focusing on an early part of the conflict, this is not the sort of war in which enemies shelter beneath civilians or use IEDs to pick away at the numbers and sanity of a beleaguered occupying force. This is not, in other words, really the sort of war being currently fought.

Whatever its bias or excisions, *MOH* rejects the sort of gung-ho globetrotting baloney seen in *Modern Warfare*, and makes an honest attempt not to trivialise the lives of US soldiers, creating an air of sober authenticity which is unusual among shooters. It is perhaps a small watershed – bringing some degree of credible soldierly tactics to what is otherwise blockbuster entertainment. While it's possible to run and gun, the game impresses upon you the importance of 'no movement without fire', maintaining 'noise discipline', and avoiding silhouetting yourself against the sky. Terms like 'danger close' are more than just fetishistic military gabble – many of the game's set-pieces involve marking targets for artillery and air support – something which the troops are not keen to do while standing nearby. But *MOH*'s major triumph is in describing, albeit in airport-paperback terms, how different branches of the military work together. Control zips between different members of the armed forces like a relay race

> It is so keen to exonerate the soldiers themselves, who all operate with utmost virtue, that it comes across with the forceful naivety of propaganda





A cutscene shows a friendly fire incident – though this is blamed on a bellicose general in Washington rather than itchy trigger fingers. Perhaps *MOH* is paving the way for mainstream games to deal with the grim realities of war

MOH doesn't paint a great picture for military discipline. A colonel cuts an idiot general's video feed, and SEALs disobey direct orders to rescue MIA colleagues

Early plans for *MOH* apparently acknowledged the difficulty of distinguishing combatants from non-combatants, but no civilians make an appearance in the final version of the game – perhaps its largest and most troubling omission

– SEALs perform subversion and reconnaissance behind enemy lines, while Tier 1 operators mark and snipe embedded mortar positions, and the Rangers plough headlong into enemy forces with the support of overwhelming air power.

Though it paints a broad picture of an invasion force conducting itself with appropriate military rigour, this is still a heavily scripted, linear shooting gallery in which hordes of enemies bundle towards you without any thought of of self-preservation. But the game turns this crude tenet to its advantage in missions where retreat becomes essential; several key moments deal in simple survival, as the numbers of enemies overwhelm, whittling down and working around your remaining cover. There's some variety besides, albeit within the genre's well-explored mechanical limits: the SEALs infiltrate moonlit villages to place tracking devices on supply trucks; sniping sections play with optical modes to keep things lively; and a turn as a helicopter gunner offers cathartic carnage after a near-death experience as a Ranger. *MOH* does its best to create cinematic thrills, but with the more fantastic opportunities curbed by the need for authenticity, the game's adherence to shooter rote feels a little claustrophobic.

And it is a short campaign, clocking in at six hours or so. Still, the multiplayer's competence suggests enduring appeal, should your sensitivities permit you to indulge in it. Made by DICE, it shares a good number of similarities with that studio's games, assuredly blending *Battlefield*'s smartly orchestrated objective-oriented matches with some of the lethal, concussive vigour of market leader *Modern Warfare 2*. Like *MW2*, you can earn extra abilities the more kills you rack up, but these have been better balanced; mortar strikes use line of sight, requiring the player to be exposed to danger while calling in the ordnance.

There are some niggles: as the enemy pushes forward, defenders can find themselves spawned behind enemy lines with a clear shot at their backs, while some levels make it all too easy to pin the enemy to their spawn point. Judicious use of smoke is essential, with many levels requiring you to pass through a bottleneck or rush a ridgeline. It's a pacey, punchy affair, and its short rounds hold more tactical interest and more opportunity for co-operation than *MW2*'s chaotic, boisterous frays. It also feels more varied in its scenarios than recent *Battlefield* games, its various modes moving adeptly between claustrophobic deathmatches, open battlegrounds and epic tugs-of-war. But without *Battlefield*'s wealth of vehicles, devastating toys and destructible scenery, *MOH* lacks some of that game's moment-to-moment dynamism.

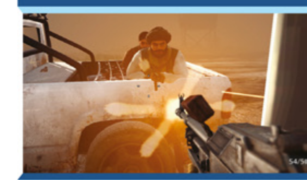


MOH is a robust, if seldom surprising, rebuttal to *MW2*'s dominance, and its measured tone and diligent observation of military patter make it a marginally more meaningful representation of modern warfare itself. It's an idealised one – going by the book, telling only part of the story. But it's only because *MOH* makes a brave move away from the ludicrous extremes of other shooter fantasies that its failure to seize reality entirely becomes so palpable. **[7]**

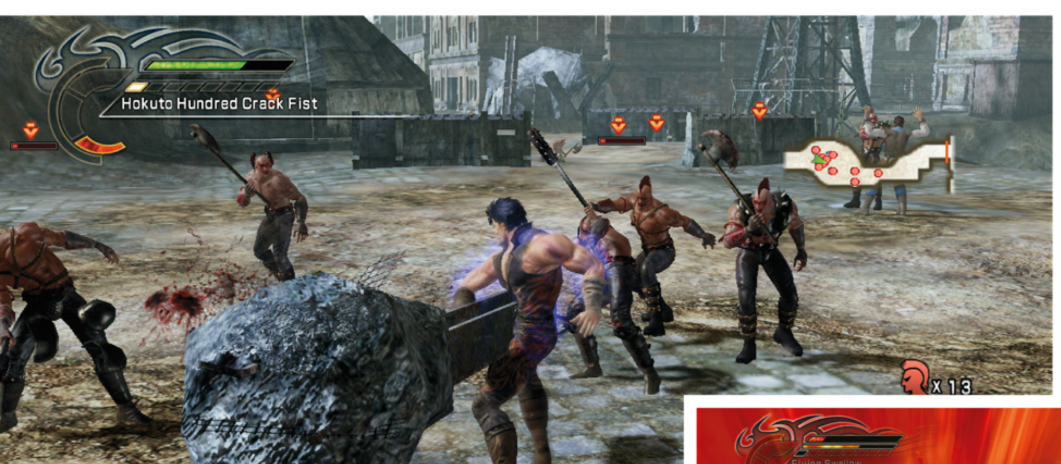


Vehicles in multiplayer act more as map-specific special weapons than regular transport. In the campaign, meanwhile, the Tier 1's quad bike is thankfully no more than a cameo: it's an unpleasantly flighty thing

Happiness is a warm gun



Strip away the setting and the raw details of *MOH*'s combat remain dependably entertaining but largely without invention. Environments fluctuate in size and shape, each posing different problems for attack, defence and retreat. The campaign's tools hold few shocks but each delivers a suitable sense of heft and relentless, abrasive noise – although the fact that enemies take so many bullets somewhat undermines their sense of lethality. *MOH* isn't as mechanically sound as some of its peers, either: most of the game's minor bugs will likely be hoovered up in a day-one patch, but collision detection often has you catching your feet on rubble, while invisible walls hem you in.





Special attacks are eye-straining flurries, pummelling opponents into the dust and resulting in exploding torsos or sliced and diced flesh, depending on the moveset



There's an incongruity to Ken's abilities: he can pick up girders (main) but is unable to leap the lowest of fences. Throwing objects is an unnecessary inconvenience, often required to destroy flimsy walls. Timed inputs (above) finish off bosses: the backdrops recall *Street Fighter IV*'s but the task is simplistic rather than anything involving

FIST OF THE NORTH STAR: KEN'S RAGE

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) **RELEASE:** NOVEMBER 5
PUBLISHER: TECMO KOEI **DEVELOPER:** KOEI **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E220

In stretching Fist Of The North Star's taut skin over the skeleton of *Dynasty Warriors*, Koei has landed itself in the more general territory of thirdperson action adventures. Once the reigning warlords of its weapons-based crowd-control niche, the designers are now competing with some heavy hitters and, evidently, are unequipped to deal.

The story of Kenshiro as he wades through a post-apocalyptic world of Mad Max extras is (perhaps rightly) treated as fluff by a team that is eager to get you into the thick of it as soon as your thumbs touch the controller. Missions are split into objectives involving bosses, civilian rescues and switch punching. Though the pace is varied, there's no consistency to the experience and not enough fluidity to the combat. The cast have the bodies of gods and the spatial awareness of drunks, not helped by a lack of targeting and the absence of a decent camera. Your view defaults at an awkward mid-level with a penchant for tilting to high angles that cut off your periphery, and the energy spent tapping and jiggling to manually adjust the camera feels like it'd be better spent on more rewarding pursuits. Unfortunately, bursts of platforming and item hunting demonstrate how inflexible Koei's template is once it's pushed beyond flat landscapes and the swinging of long swords.

And no wonder Ken's raging – he's not even the most intuitive or charismatic mountain of muscle in his own game. Rei, an unlockable character with a converging storyline in the main quest, is more agile, responsive and dynamic, clawing his way through the hapless goons and mauling away with some athletic airborne charges. It's a shame that the payoff for killing blows is so flat. Like the empty drama of the narration, everything in *Ken's Rage* feels hollow. The sound of connecting hits is dull and anticlimactic, while the constant whining of the enemies, along with the repeated one-liners from the heroes, soon turns into a grind.

There are saving graces: the boss encounters are brief and painless, maintaining a sense of empowerment to the player and offering up some colourful characters. The game engine itself is solid and smooth, never letting up regardless of the many effects and deaths onscreen. And sprinting works well, whittling the intervals between face-smashing to a minimum, with the godsend of a counter-attack gifting you the ability to recover from a freak wave of over-enthusiastic thugs.

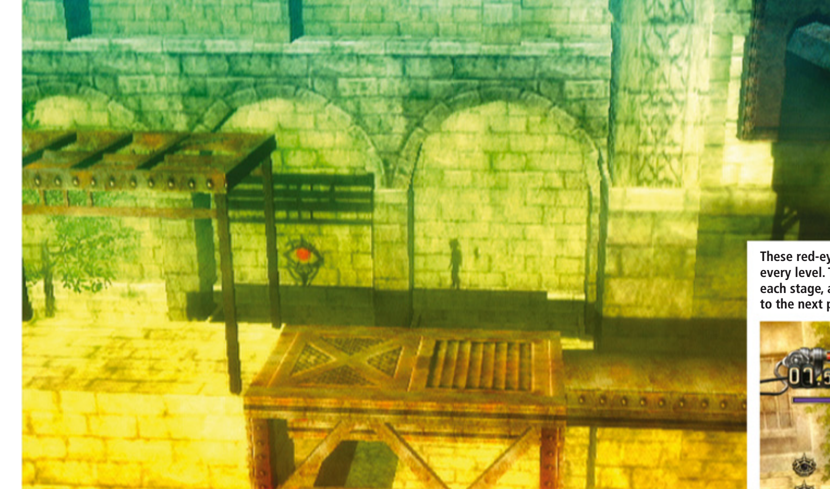
It all adds up to an uneven brawler, a game with the resources and technology to break through the walls of the developer's lineage but one unprepared to fully let go and take a chance. **[5]**

Mamiya doesn't know martial arts, but her effectiveness in combat comes from a set of projectiles with good range. There's a crossbow to fall back on that makes short work of any incoming foes

Zoning out

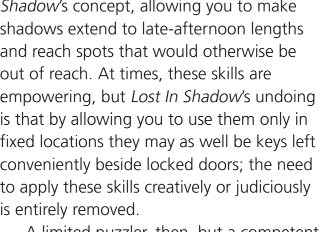


Dream Mode hands the spotlight over to some of the minor characters from the series (unlockable via progress in the main, Legend Mode), and is a zone capture affair with a much stronger flavour of *Dynasty Warriors*. The body count is higher and the pace more immediate, providing at least a modicum of relief from the chores of the main game as you and your men take on the competition. The problem is that your fellow brawlers don't seem too invested in it, wandering around aimlessly and barely posing a threat to henchmen right under their noses.





These red-eyed collectibles (left) are the focus of every level. Three of them are secreted around each stage, and must be found before progress to the next part of the tower becomes possible



A simple levelling system sees you collect orbs from every defeated foe. This adds the compulsive desire to kill every shadow beast you see which the combat itself is unable to provide



LOST IN SHADOW

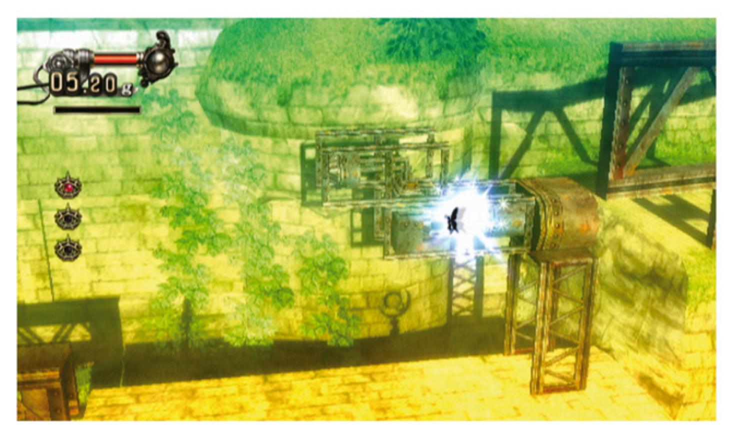
FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), JANUARY 4 (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: HUDSON SOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Lost In Shadow isn't quite as daring as it seems, but it does still surprise you. You play the shadow of a boy separated, Peter Pan style, from its body. Dumped at the base of the very sun-bleached tower its body happens to be residing at the peak of, and incapable of directly interacting with the solid stonework around it, you must instead negotiate the shade. Rather than leap from pillar to platform, you jump between the shadows cast on the floor behind them. When you first take control of the shadow it's 'standing' (or cast flat against the ground) below an open well. You think you might fall into it, but instead your form is silhouetted against its curved walls.

These moments, in which sheer, impassable cliff-faces are turned into convenient footpaths through nothing less than a trick of the light, set expectations for a greater subversion of 2D platform games than *Lost In Shadow* actually goes on to provide. As the game continues, and its shadow structures become more complex, the architecture in the foreground becomes more contrived – to the point where it's hard not to notice that there exists an entirely uninhabited platform game near the front of the screen. Of the two mechanics attempting to make the game's shadow conceit tangible, one – twisting and turning prescribed pieces of architecture (and by extension, that architecture's shadow) by pointing the Remote and tapping 'A' – feels methodical: you come up against an impassable barrier and, lo, it just happens to be the shadow of a piece of scenery that you're able to move. The second frequently used mechanic – changing the angle of local light sources by moving a slider – is a more intriguing exploration of *Lost In Shadow*'s concept, allowing you to make shadows extend to late-afternoon lengths and reach spots that would otherwise be out of reach. At times, these skills are empowering, but *Lost In Shadow*'s undoing is that by allowing you to use them only in fixed locations they may as well be keys left conveniently beside locked doors; the need to apply these skills creatively or judiciously is entirely removed.

A limited puzzler, then, but a competent platformer, with a *Prince Of Persia*-esque sense of weight given to the shadow's leaps and bounds. Like the Prince, the shadow prefers whipping out a sword to stomping on enemies' heads, but like the Prince's more recent iterations it struggles when it comes to making combat engaging. Fighting the various shadow beasts populating the tower's shaded tiers is a slightly clunky exercise in which you creep forward, slash an enemy and run away when it appears to be entering an attack animation. Mistakes are more likely to result from impatience than being outmatched. More interesting are the blue-eyed enemies, which can only be defeated by turning the tower's defences against them. Unfortunately, as with the rest of *Lost In Shadow*'s puzzles, solutions to the problems caused by these creatures are almost always within immediate reach.

There's a methodical pleasure to be found in *Lost In Shadow*. It wraps up dependable mechanics in a visual style which, even without its shadowy twist, would nonetheless recall the parched palettes of *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*. That twist, however, is the root cause of the game's disappointments, hinting at something beyond a typical platform game, yet leaving players to go through the genre's familiar motions – just in the shade. **[6]**



The creature which functions as your pointer is a sylph (an air elemental also found in Alexander Pope's mock-heroic narrative poem Rape Of The Lock). Twistable pieces of architecture are identifiable by a discreetly flickering point of light

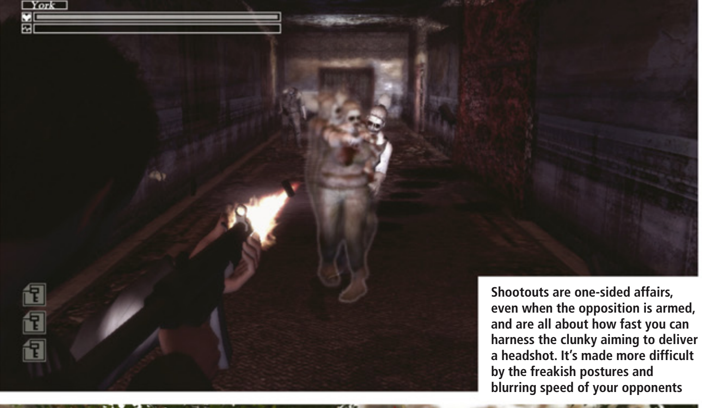
Axis of swivel



Progress through *Lost In Shadow*'s levels is punctuated by trips through shadowy doorways to isolated platform challenges. As well as providing a visual departure from the rest of the game (these levels tend to hang in a blotchy, watercolour-tinted void), they also offer a chance to play with yet another of the game's intriguing but ultimately disappointing mechanics. Stepping into one of the twirling, double-helix-like portals dotted around these levels allows you to rotate the position of all the architecture and shadows around you. In practice, the impossibility of guessing whether shadows need to rotated left or right to align correctly is mitigated by a penalty-free instant restart every time you get it wrong.



The decision to pursue the main story is often yours, the plot giving you time-limited intervals to peruse the sinister and strange town of Greenvale where nothing is as it seems



Shootouts are one-sided affairs, even when the opposition is armed, and are all about how fast you can harness the clunky aiming to deliver a headshot. It's made more difficult by the freakish postures and blurring speed of your opponents





Even the pause screen is infected by writer/director Hidetaka Suehiro's wild imagination, complete with moving deer head and blood-red leaf décor. It makes sense, honest



DEADLY PREMONITION

FORMAT: 360 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: RISING STAR **DEVELOPER:** ACCESS GAMES

A thriller with subversive style, *Deadly Premonition* is a love-letter to western TV shows and cinema. It plays out like *Silent Hill* spot-welded to *No More Heroes*' restricted sandbox, with all the curious characters and odd scenarios that comparison implies. Though there's a mystery to be unravelled by protagonist and G-man Francis York, the real enigma is the detective himself. The beauty of *Deadly Premonition* is that it's a straightforward whodunnit viewed through the cracked prism of an unreliable narrator, conjuring an atmosphere of suspicion and confusion throughout.

The mechanics are flimsy and easy to pick apart by current standards, serving mostly as a device to break up the pace and tide you over to the next instalment in a weird tale of backyard American murder. Even so, the driving, exploring and shooting are at least functional, if lacking polish and, like the overall story, derivative of influences both good and bad. Combat, with firearms or melee weapons, is clunky and laboured, like a poor man's *Resident Evil 4*. Also borrowed from that oeuvre are store rooms, save points and, infuriatingly, the switching of camera angles from over-the-shoulder to fixed perspective, rendering the controls cumbersome and disorienting as you navigate an isometric stairway. It's an irregular occurrence, though, and one that, like all aspects of the game, has been thought through and implemented for dramatic effect. There's a distinct sense that all the ideas thrown at *Deadly Premonition* – and there are many – were deliberately picked rather than scrambled together.

Driving sections are bland and as equally rigid as the shooting-gallery hallways, with limited physics and comically strict collision, yet again it feels consciously designed rather than accidentally banal. The open roads of Greenvale town are a counterpoint to York's own self-importance and bragging: his life is as mundane as anyone else's. It's just one aspect of *Deadly Premonition* that invites deeper reading and analysis.

The intertextual references (see 'Twin creeps') are too numerous to list here, but the overall package is one that feels like a mosaic of influences, pieced together with a playful, loving eye and planted in a story that can switch from tension to comedy at the drop of a hat. None of it would work without accomplished voice acting, and *Deadly Premonition* is a triumph of both timing and delivery. York delivers his one-liners with Ace Ventura's absurdist charm, while other scenes riff entirely on David Lynchian moments of unusual cinematic scene-blocking.

Inevitable points of comparison will be this year's double-whammy of *Heavy Rain* and *Alan Wake*, titles with a similarly strong emphasis on storytelling. The difference is that *Deadly Premonition* has more ideas, and ambition, than both. Though far less polished, it's just as engrossing, too. **[7]**

Twin creeps



The comparisons with David Lynch's body of work is complimentary rather than accusatory. Game director Hidetaka Suehiro's story has all the core components – a freak car crash, a twisted view of Americana, a strong sense of the macabre – of a Lynchian descent into the psychological wilderness. It may verge on interactive movie, but it's a mixture of gameplay and cutscenes that's balanced and open enough to allow you the downtime to recover from protracted scenes of weirdly wonderful dialogue. There are plenty of side-quests to distract you from the main story, and if the save points aren't frequent enough there's the fallback of generous checkpoints.



York regularly takes time out to chat to Zach, his alter-ego and, effectively, you. As you collect the pieces of each scenario's puzzle, the ability to 'profile' is granted, resulting in a cutscene revealing the story of a crime





We couldn't think of a better way to take on these sparkling devils than with a flowery angelic tank. Scenes like this are more likely to arise from start screen experimentation, though

SUPER SCRIBBLENAUTS

FORMAT: DS **RELEASE:** OCTOBER 29 **PUBLISHER:** WARNER BROS
DEVELOPER: 5TH CELL **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E215

One of gaming's biggest toolsets just got bigger. And more flexible. As if the first *Scribblenauts*, with its cavernous vault full of nouns to pick and choose from, didn't offer enough freedom, 5th Cell has given the power of description to the player, turning what were once rigidly defined pieces of artwork and code you'd conjure into existence into mutable, rewritable playthings. Want a chocolate fireman? You can make one. Just be sure he doesn't wander into the path of that giant winged mutant electric scorpion, or things could get messy. That uniquely Scribblenautian feeling of poking around the dusty, neglected corners of your vocabulary in the hope of finding a word that will unlock another half-minute's amusement has been intensified – and made even more frustrating and rewarding by the need to deploy all the adjectives you've forgotten as well.

As with the first *Scribblenauts*, the result is that the start screen is an endlessly diverting playground. The preset backdrops for your scribbled summonings are more defined than before – arriving already populated with buildings and various obscure creatures – but you can throw this furniture in the bin and get on with the important business of trying to push the dictionary to its limits. And, sadly, you'll find those limits a fair bit faster than you could first time around, the adjectives players will want to play with having seemingly proven harder to identify, or perhaps execute, than the nouns in the original game. Words ending in '-ing' can often be troublesome, but there are some other odd exceptions. When we previewed *Super Scribblenauts* in June, we wondered if players could replicate the 'God trumps everything' dynamic of the first game by liberally deploying the word 'almighty'. We needn't have worried, because 'almighty' isn't recognised. Nor are 'impenetrable' or 'tawny'. These missing words remain the exception rather than the rule, but you'll run into gaps more often than you may expect.

Level design has also undergone a rigorous overhaul, with the aim of addressing the criticism that the sheer empowerment the first game offered made things too easy. Endlessly spawning jetpacks and deities won't help you this time around, as *Super Scribblenauts*' solutions are much more rigidly defined. Levels will usually present you with a scene – say, an empty campsite – and task you will filling in the details – a tent, a campfire, some food. The result is a shift from too much freedom to too little. Yes, there are usually more words available to solve a puzzle than you'll need, and, yes, on occasion *Super Scribblenauts* will throw up a genuinely open-ended scenario, but all too often you're reduced to playing a simple word-association game, matching objects to NPCs based on obvious stereotypes. Frustratingly, spawning objects has become the end, rather than the means – where's the fun in arming villagers to the teeth if the level ends as they're ready to go to war?

It's hard to dislike *Super Scribblenauts*, perhaps because it's equally hard to imagine a solution to the balancing act that generating challenge in a series like this requires. But *Scribblenauts*' levels have gone from being unfocused sentences in which a few choice nouns can dominate to rigid, over-punctuated impositions on player creativity. *Super Scribblenauts* has the words, but still struggles with adding syntax to its enormous vocabulary. **[6]**





Placing some adjectives in front of the word 'potion' will create a brew which transfers those qualities to whichever NPC drinks it. We're not quite sure what we fed to this enormous angry pikeman, however



Decorating a suburban home is one of the duller tasks the game has you perform. Spawning a hysterical television which insisted on leaping in terror whenever we came near made things more lively



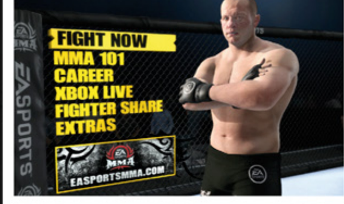
The game has a surprising educative bent, often requesting players to fill in missing stages of animals' life or evolutionary cycles. It's easy to imagine the word-association puzzles chiming well with younger players

Adjective adjective noun



Despite their welcome inclusion, it's rare that you'll find yourself needing to use adjectives during the majority of the game's challenges – problems and solutions are inevitably themed around the more tangible nouns. *Super Scribblenauts*' solution is adjective levels, which create specific problems solvable only through use of an extra, qualifying word. Sometimes you'll be tasked with unifying the distinct natures of two characters – like a doctor and an assassin – with a single phrase: 'stealthy doctor' would do it. Other adjective levels will require you to come up with a costume for Maxwell which satisfies the disparate likes of a panel of eclectic judges. You can always cheat, however, with a description that pleases most of the panel and using accessories to suit the remainder's tastes.







UFC Undisputed 2010 featured a great career mode which, as you gradually assembled your fighting style, made you fascinated with the sport. When it's not failing to copy it, *MMA*'s coughs up insultingly simple training exercises

EA SPORTS MMA

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

It sounds like some kind of existential dilemma: if a decent MMA game does an atrocious job of proving its quality, is it actually decent at all? Likewise, if the fighters are too obscure for their talents to be known, how much does accurately modelling them matter? To hardcore combat sport fans familiar with names like Kazuo Misaki and Ronaldo Souza, such questions might seem irrelevant. To the casual crowd, without whom *EA Sports MMA* will surely perish, they could mean everything.

Like the UFC's chief competitor in the pay-per-view market (and this game's biggest licence), Strikeforce, there are triumphs and there are stars in *EA Sports MMA*. But there is also disarray. Unsurprisingly, there's much in common with *Fight Night* as well, and not all of it good.

The return of Total Punch Control, *Fight Night*'s intuitive mapping of offence and defence to the analogue sticks, is ultimately advantageous. It feels natural, drawing you in deep before you realise it's actually not that suitable for a frantic, full-body sport; all those loops and switchbacks needed to mix up feet and hands just make things feel sluggish, making the inclusion of classic face-button controls a lifeline not just to the player, but the game itself.

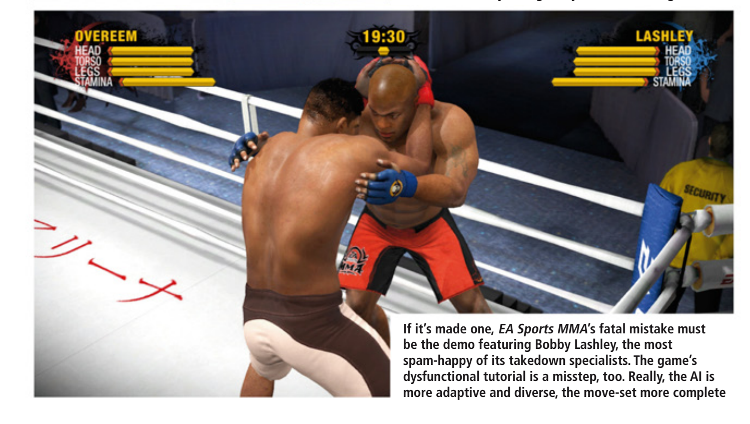
So many differences between the *UFC* games and this one come down to heritage. While *Undisputed*'s grappling and submission systems echo those of THQ's WWE games, testing reflexes and physical endurance, EA's are obsessed with virtual stamina. Mocking button-mashers at every opportunity, its fights revolve around what you spend and when. Escaping, reversing and improving position quickly feel like a persistently scored game of rock-paper-scissors, the art being to distract your opponent with cheap blows before each vigorous gamble.

So beautifully animated is the ground game, from defensive sprawls to the snaring and passing of legs, that it makes things feel a whole lot more sophisticated than they are. The attempt/deny pattern of grappling might well be one that neither series can escape, and the same goes for unsatisfying submission games. The one here is, in a word, frustrating. Choke submissions mean both players tracking a moving, vanishing target around a large circle with the analogue stick, each attempt sapping stamina, with success tightening or weakening the hold. Limb submissions send the stamina battle into overdrive as you 'strategically' mash the buttons without running out of steam. Ultimately it's one of those systems that works a whole lot better against humans than AI. It also, in a divisive side effect, makes flash KOs an endangered species.

As a first instalment this *should* compare favourably to *UFC Undisputed 2009*, what with its lifelike roster of fighters and uniquely diverse rule sets and venues. But a hopeless career mode, disastrous 'realtime' tutorial, uninspired commentary and lack of cohesive presentation jab and kick away at its appeal. This is not, as it needed to be, the *Pro Evo* of mixed martial arts. **[6]**



Cover star Fedor Emelianenko lost his first fight in ten years in June, his mythical stature going along with it. Joint cover star Randy Couture, a prize catch from the UFC Hall Of Fame, is rumoured to be considering retirement. Not, you might say, an ideal message

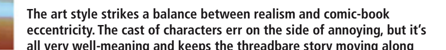


If it's made one, *EA Sports MMA*'s fatal mistake must be the demo featuring Bobby Lashley, the most spam-happy of its takedown specialists. The game's dysfunctional tutorial is a misstep, too. Really, the AI is more adaptive and diverse, the move-set more complete

Intercontinental



As is often the case, *MMA*'s multiplayer modes are a medley of inventions from past EA Sports games, aligned and branded to suit this one. Live Broadcast is an ambitious attempt to turn players into online stars, the plan being to broadcast selected fights via the game and the web, live commentary included. Fight Card is a glorified exhibition mode similar to *Undisputed 2010*'s, hosting up to four fights per card and ten players. The obligatory persistent bragging contest is Belt Race, where contender points add up to title fights against online champions. The Game Face photo upload feature returns, though the ability to cut and upload highlight reels is a counter-intuitive washout. Often, in fact, the game's virtual camerawork leaves a lot to be desired.



The art style strikes a balance between realism and comic-book eccentricity. The cast of characters err on the side of annoying, but it's all very well-meaning and keeps the threadbare story moving along

SHAUN WHITE SKATEBOARDING

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3, WII **RELEASE:** OCTOBER 29
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT **DEVELOPER:** UBISOFT MONTREAL **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E220

It's to Ubisoft Montreal's credit – and players' benefit – that the studio has managed to strike a balance between its own structural game design and its headline star's rulebook-burning approach to life. With Neversoft's *Tony Hawk* out of the limelight, and *Skate* defining the open-world groove for the sport, it would have been obvious to follow the leader. Instead Montreal has crafted a unique experience, a hybrid of both breeds of the genre that doesn't quite hit the peaks of either.

Considering the subject matter, the background story chosen in order to give it impetus is certainly an unusual one. With society ruled by an Orwellian order, and White imprisoned for his rebel attitude, it's your task to free minds from the monotony of the everyday grind with – what else? – your board and your braggadocio.

The map is sectioned off to allow the engine to breathe (though load times are still excessive) and to keep you focused on the individual tasks at hand. Areas start off blanketed in concrete grey until liberated by your every trick and ollie. As your smooth moves impress, a pulse is emitted from your character, transforming the local area, breathing life and colour into the surroundings. Post-grind, rails shine in the sunlight, graffiti grows up walls, Wendy's restaurants spring to life… The politics may be silly, but the sense of empowerment is remarkable and it successfully draws you into White's world, adding something beyond high-score combos and procrastinatory exploration.

Building your Flow – a three-stage power meter – by tricking to unlock new areas and progress is your main drive, and it's enough to keep you plugging away. It's down to the additional, repetitive requirements – destroy floating Zeppelins, grind speakers delivering propagandist messages – to interfere with the game's own flow. To reach high-up areas Montreal has introduced grind rails and ramps that grow as you ride them. These luminous green landmarks are the real ace up the designers' sleeves: midway into the game's lengthy story mode (around ten hours) you're given the ability to manipulate their direction in realtime. It allows for just enough agency to make you feel superhuman without breaking the mould of the mostly linear path to the next location. Flow itself, however, can be inexcusably difficult to muster and scavenging the environments for perfect trick setups often becomes more a labour than a love.

The highlights of *Shaun White Skateboarding*'s innovations ultimately outweigh the level design shortcomings. It never hits Neversoft's golden-age standard, but it comes much closer than such a daft premise would lead you to expect. **[7]**



The option to plant markers and restore yourself to them is a neat way to avoid the frustrations of falling from an elevated area. Fortunately the physics are generous, as are checkpoints



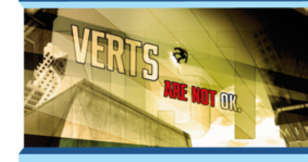
Tricks and jumps can be performed with the face buttons or the right thumbstick. Though this system is borrowed from *Skate*, it has none of the intricacies of EA's benchmark title





Environments are solid and sizeable, but the layouts can be difficult to improvise with. The velocity and tricking potential of a good half-pipe is a suitable remedy

Hack and smash



To break up the pace, Montreal introduces hacking stations as your revolutionary journey continues to the heart of the oppressive regime. These short interludes require you to guide a ball bearing through the circuitry of the hacking terminal, avoiding traps along the way. It's a strange shift in tone as you guide your miniature ball through the Tron-like inner life of a computer, and further indication of Montreal having more ideas than it can perhaps realise with total conviction, but it's a short, silly filler that amuses rather than confuses.



THE BALL

FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TRIPWIRE INTERACTIVE **DEVELOPER:** TEOTL STUDIOS

Primal sphere



On top of the campaign there is a series of challenge rooms that defy you to survive nine long waves of enemies. Although combat is a rather unwieldy and unwelcome inclusion in the game, the challenge rooms do a good job with what they have, making the player kill enemies for combos and health boosts, activating traps to ensnare pursuing foes. Unfortunately, as with the campaign, the most useful solution is the least interesting: hole up in a corner and roll your ball back and forth as enemies throw themselves beneath it.

Having graduated from modding competition medallist to commercial release, *The Ball* is an unexpectedly polished production from a promising studio. It is not, however, *Portal* – a fact for which you can hardly blame it, but which still reflects unfavourably upon its blend of firstperson puzzling, platforming and action.

With test chambers swapped for the cavernous mountain hollows of an ancient Mesoamerican civilization, *The Ball* takes the idea of *Portal*'s Companion Cube, buffs off the corners and sets you a series of conundrums for which your new spherical friend is the cipher. It's a cumbersome thing to roll about and, frankly, your need to ferry it around quite quickly feels like a nuisance – even with the aid of a handheld device that allows you to draw it to you with one mouse button and shunt it away with the other.

Your challenge involves propelling the thing across spike pits or lava to depress otherwise unreachable buttons – and this is pretty much the level of complexity at which *The Ball* operates. Periodically, a gimmick is deployed with a more intriguing purpose: dip the ball in oil and you can lay a black flammable trail, while other levels see it spit spines and conduct electricity. Yet the game never quite escalates to any grand enigmatic purpose, and doesn't seem to know how to frame some of its best ideas as a question. A sequence in which the ball emits a low-gravity zone in its immediate vicinity passes by without any real puzzle being wrought from the new capabilities.

Despite a sense of spectacle drawing you through ziggurats and lakes of lava, enthusiasm wanes in the default work of finding and pressing buttons. Teotl looks to combat for the solution to this problem, which, if anything, makes it worse. Though there's relish to be found in squishing zombies, beetles and creatures of the depths, the ball is an awkward and frustrating weapon, and the enemies tedious, stupid opponents. The grandly staged boss battles demand more complex tactics, but although credit must be given for the absence of glowing weakspots, they are often a little too obtuse or clumsily implemented.

Perhaps worse still, the mere presence of enemies means that you spend too much of the game cowering behind the ball – your only weapon against them – and this hampers your freedom to explore the detail of Teotl's richly imagined underground empire. It's something of a shame: through a mixture of economic but unusually literate storytelling, which is to be found in unobtrusive collectable form, and an adept use of the Unreal engine, the developer shows itself to be a worldbuilder of quite some panache.

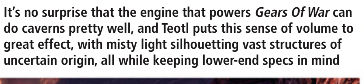
Teotl's next project, whatever it may be, should be awaited with some interest. There are things to admire here, and *The Ball*'s simple challenges ensure a pleasant, if casual engagement, enhanced by the skillful drawing of this subterranean world. But there's a reason that the phrase 'ball and chain' isn't one of approbation; even if Teotl's ambitions weren't marred by the ill-advised abundance of combat, the limits of *The Ball*'s central conceit are clear. **[6]**



The ball is your only means of defence, either by rolling over enemies or, in the case of boss monsters, using it to activate environmental traps. Thankfully, dying resets you at a checkpoint without losing progress

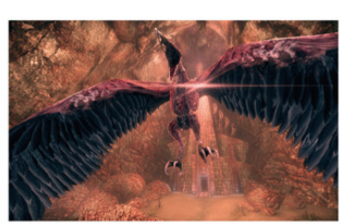


As your ball-wrangling device churns away on attract mode (making a sanity-sapping noise rather like the sound of knives being sharpened), the ball trundles obediently in front of you, its mass helpfully melting away to semi-translucence



It's no surprise that the engine that powers *Gears Of War* can do caverns pretty well, and Teotl puts this sense of volume to great effect, with misty light silhouetting vast structures of uncertain origin, all while keeping lower-end specs in mind








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FINAL FANTASY: THE 4 HEROES OF LIGHT

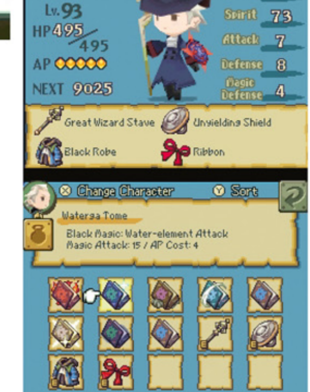
FORMAT: DS **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER:** MATRIX



Hats can be upgraded with gems earned in battle. Death, as in *Dragon Quest*, sends you to the nearest save point and docks a handful of upgrade stones

Producer Tomoya Asano pitches this game as a "classic fantasy RPG using today's technology". Young hero, unspeakable evil, a strict town-overworld-dungeon cycle: are we confusing "classic" with "unambitious"? Indeed, so indebted is dev studio Matrix to the old ways that it seems to have granted a free pass to the old problems. Quest signposting is buried in unclear dialogue snippets, bosses are beaten through trial and error, and grinding is rife. The only evidence of today's technology is the charming popup-book aesthetic, though even this vanishes in bland, identikit dungeons.

A twisting narrative structure should elevate the tale. For the first half the game focuses, Pulp Fiction-style, on four interweaving narratives. It's certainly conducive to brisk scene changes, whipping between pirate caves, floating towers and a realm in which our heroes exist as animals. But the scenarios are obvious and the writing witless, begging for that localisation magic behind *Dragon Quest IX*'s poignant vignettes. It doesn't help that the job system, wherein classes are dictated by novelty hats, allows characters to change career with a button press. With no investment in your decisions, all characters are all things to all people, negating their individual roles in the story and leading to an over-reliance on some overpowered options.



The inventory is limited to 15 slots and spells are only available if you're carrying the relevant book. It's a nice slant on character customisation, even if it is limited by the slim item catalogue

Despite this, combat finds a unique rhythm. Operating around recharging ability points, the system rewards patience with stronger attacks and spells. Choreographing team strikes requires more attention than mindless attack thumbing. It's an unfussy, streamlined design, intended to keep all combat options open. Dubious AI decisions can undermine this, though. Targets are automatically selected, resulting in wasted healing magic and attacks on less deadly foes. It's no less murky than *DQIX*'s team attack order, but here it combines with a harsher difficulty to become a potent irritant. Some strong ideas here deserve more finesse all round. **[4]**



PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE LOST FUTURE

FORMAT: DS **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** LEVEL-5

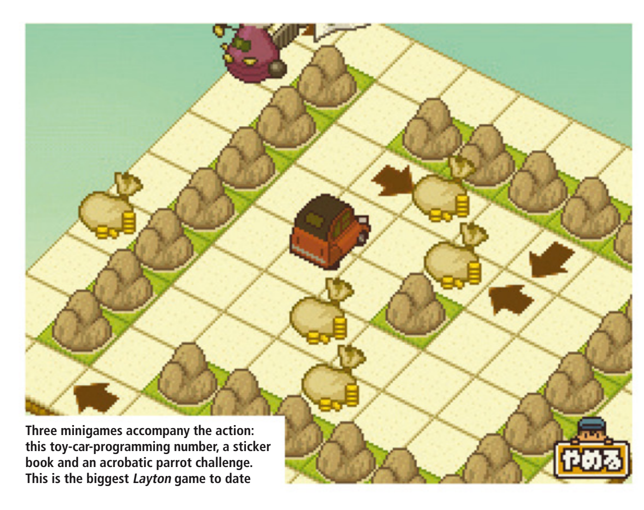
The last two years have seen *Layton* become a Christmas institution in Europe. And, like all annual treats, this year's instalment doesn't aim to shock or rewrite the rules, but offer more finely crafted puzzles and sweet narrative filler. Admittedly, this tale boasts greater ambition, attempting to tie up the first three games (recognised by Level-5 as a standalone trilogy). And, yes, the time-travelling hook does a fine job of whisking us back to Layton's formative years and forwards to a hijacked future, where three games' worth of characters must put aside differences to succeed.

If *Lost Future*'s tale is Level-5's biggest yet – a scale likely influenced by Layton's big-screen debut – the puzzle blend is at its most familiar. No brainteaser is directly repeated, but there are few 'forms' we haven't seen before. Tile sliding, cryptic map directions, if-he-likes-X-who-likes-Y – after the previous 250 puzzles the current 168 fail to dredge up any surprises. They are attractively presented, however, with slick handwriting recognition and charming illustrations. And the addition of a 'super hint' function – as close as you'll get to an answer without being told – prevents any stumbling blocks.

One quibble: hiding puzzles behind scenery and time-sensitive characters (within specific chapters) seems unnecessary. While the majority of the puzzles unfold chronologically along a signposted linear path, the few that don't do this force obsessive types to click on every last character, enduring reams of repeated dialogue on the off chance of a riddle. Puzzle hunting is the only hassle in an otherwise laidback world (Telltale's *Layton* clone *Puzzle Agent* used hotspot markers to avoid this pitfall). This niggle aside, *Professor Layton* remains a fine antidote to dull Sunday afternoons. **[7]**



Level-5 introduces more interactive puzzles, asking players to rearrange burgers, divide land, slide through a banana maze and even build a makeshift gun. There's plenty of variety



Three minigames accompany the action: this toy-car-programming number, a sticker book and an acrobatic parrot challenge. This is the biggest *Layton* game to date

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GODS VS HUMANS

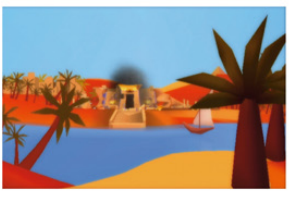
FORMAT: PC (VERSION TESTED), WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ZALLAG **DEVELOPER:** ARTEFACTS STUDIO

You're a lover and a smiter in *Gods Vs Humans*, your divine powers including lightning bolts, sandstorms and blessing the Earth with scantily clad ladies. The game itself, though, plays mostly with fire. This evil twin of the tower defence genre – rather than build and protect, you destroy and manipulate – is as antagonistic as its name implies.

The tower goes up a floor at a time, the humans scuttling between them to repair whatever damage you've done in your quest to bring it crashing down. Each floor is buttressed by four pillars you attack with a handful of both precision and area of effect powers. Destroy a floor, and the ones below take damage, favouring a tactical approach to weakening the structure. That becomes essential when you add faith to the equation, a currency that keeps the workers docile and your powers charged. So you spread your damage, distracting the workers with positive powers (the aforementioned 'Pin-up'), knocking out special floors and units, and dealing fatal blows when the faith is in your favour. Kill too many workers in the process and faith turns to anger.

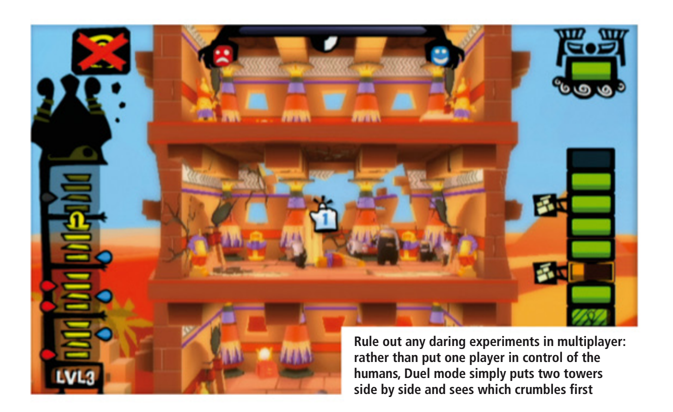
Yes, it's as complex as it sounds, especially when you cram in all the different worker and floor types, the jobs they perform and the stat buffs that apply. *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: My Life As A Darklord* was a strategically shallow game that tried to monetise as DLC what should have been included as standard; *Gods Vs Humans* is a strategically overwhelming one that doesn't know how to deal with it. Rather than gradually introduce the many plates you have to spin, it puts them all into action at once, starting with 20 near-identical walkover levels and then spiking brutally when it assumes you've worked everything out.

In fairness, you probably will have, and there's a brief window of enjoyment when the game feels fairly balanced. Then it's really not, and most of your time is spent fighting numbing stalemates in which your powers feel pathetically weak, faith veers wildly back and forth, and the randomness with which floors are added and reinforced leaves you ever unsure of which tactics to attempt. **[5]**





Progression unlocks new gods and eras, the occasional boss battle (which involves repeatedly zapping a single target), and nominal changes in your powers and their effects. It's nothing to rival the metagame in *My Life As A Darklord*



Rule out any daring experiments in multiplayer: rather than put one player in control of the humans, Duel mode simply puts two towers side by side and sees which crumbles first



COSTUME QUEST

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: THQ **DEVELOPER:** DOUBLE FINE



One annoyance is that the sheer usefulness of the robot costume's boost means you'll want to spend all your time in it, and have to switch to a different outfit before heading into battle

Sugary, light on nutrition, and tempting to eat all in one go – the tooth-enamel-dissolving confections stuffed into the bags of *Costume Quest*'s trick-or-treating stars could easily describe the game itself. An RPG with much of the genre's complexities stripped out, but with some clever ideas put in their place, the game has a disregard for filler greater than a bar of toffee's disregard for fillings.

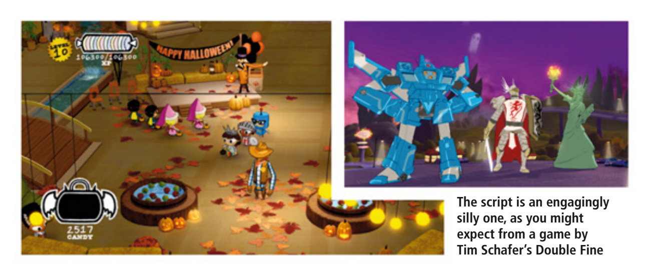
Taking the role of Wren or her brother Reynold, players embark on a quest to save the kidnapped other sibling by trick-and-treating their way around a series of Halloween-themed locations. When knocking on the door of an unvisited house, there's a 50-50 chance of there being a sweet-dispensing adult or a child-snatching monster inside. If it's the latter, it's time for a turn-based battle.

While some monsters can be found ambling in the field (and those are easy enough to sneak up on or avoid), there's no random battling in *Costume Quest*, and there's never a need to grind. It's this cutting down of what's normally a bloated style of game to a pacey, well-presented minimum which is the game's strength, but comes at a price which may frustrate players looking for a richer tactical experience.

Costume Quest's combat, which sees the questing kids transform into spectacular battling versions of their costumes, takes the *Mario RPG* approach to turn-based battles, with players having to tap buttons at precise moments in order to turn their standard blows into critical hits, or minimise the damage done by enemy assaults.

And that's almost it. Slowly charging special attacks, and collectible stamps which confer stat bonuses as well as the odd new move, add some depth, but this is still RPG-lite. There's more variety to be found in collecting and trying new costumes (some of which grant special exploration abilities outside of battle) than within the battle system itself.

Outside of battle there are well-drawn environments to explore and a handful of minigames to play. The result is a game that may not leave you full, but it'll taste pretty sweet while it lasts. **[7]**



The script is an engagingly silly one, as you might expect from a game by Tim Schafer's Double Fine


KEEPER 2



TIME EXTEND



DUNGEON KEEPER 2

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ELECTRONIC ARTS**
DEVELOPER: **BULLFROG**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **1999**

Bullfrog's underground extravaganza made immorality the only acceptable lifestyle choice, providing rich, detailed and hilarious realtime strategy

The sound of digging pervades *Dungeon Keeper 2*. Bullfrog's 1999 realtime strategy game involves the construction and operation of a dungeon and its associated labyrinth in a gloomy, underground world. There are always chambers to be excavated, minerals to be mined and exploratory tunnels to be dug in order to expand your area of play. The imps, tiny magical creatures who comprise your basic workforce, are continually scraping and picking away at the ground somewhere, carrying out your orders. It's a pleasantly double-edged sound – industrious, but also subversive. You're eating away at the world around you, undermining, corroding, tunnelling like a colony of termites. And if your imps run out of orders and stop working – you'll see them sit against the wall and light up cigarettes – you might still hear digging. That would be the sound of one of your rival keepers chipping away at the rock in your direction, heading inexorably towards you.

Dungeon Keeper 2 could have been a recipe for dreary sadism, but instead it's all about beautiful, rich, detailed, absorbing sadism

Building and undermining at the same time – that's the centre of the appeal of *Dungeon Keeper 2*. The player must design and construct a detailed and multi-functional underground world to perform a number of tasks, but also revel in destruction, murder, torture and slavery. Indeed, those are the tasks. This is a dungeon, after all. In other hands, *DK2* could have been a recipe for dreary sadism. But Bullfrog put together a world that was all about beautiful, rich, detailed, absorbing, funny sadism.

A typical game begins with a single chamber: the Dungeon Heart. This, the core of your realm, is where your treasure is stored and is also the source of your health. If the gigantic pulsing muscle at the centre of this room is subjected to a sustained attack by your enemies, it will die.

A band of heroes, indicated by grey health flowers, penetrates the centre of a dungeon, battling the player's creatures in red. The petals indicate health



If the pulsing Dungeon Heart is destroyed, the game is lost. To the left is a portal, the route for creatures

And if it dies, you die. So the dungeon must be built up around it: rings of defences along with facilities that will attract and sustain an army of happy, belligerent monsters. These start with a lair, which gives them somewhere to sleep; a hatchery, which provides chickens for them to eat; and a training room for them to hone their combat skills. Specialist structures like libraries, workshops and torture chambers attract specific kinds of monsters, although most of the creatures in *DK2* are familiar sword and sorcery types.

Later, swankier rooms include glamorous casinos and not-so-glamorous combat pits, which either make creatures happier by giving them R&R or make them better killers by sending them to A&E. Some of them also seem to enjoy recreation in the torture chamber, but we're not here to judge.

As you're laying out rooms and corridors, assigning functions to them, attracting employees and specialists, a particular strain may be identified in *DK2*'s twisted DNA: it is obviously a descendant of Bullfrog's *Theme Hospital*, which was developed in parallel with the original *Dungeon Keeper* and released just months before it in 1997. So where are the patients? In *Theme Hospital*, the aim was to keep the members of the public who strayed into your world alive, and they mostly only died by accident. Mostly. In *DK2*, the roaming members of the public are tedious, bellowing heroes, representatives of the so-called forces of good, and if they find their way into your realm they need to be subjected to a deadly form of triage.

Your troll-filled workshops can build traps, from simple passive



SNOOZE ALARM

One of the best features of *DK2* is the 'mentor' or narrator, given plummy voice by actor Richard Ridings. The mentor regularly drops jokes into the game's more routine messages, such as: "One of your imps does a great impression of you. He can even do the ears." This sense of humour could manifest itself at unexpected times. If the system clock passed midnight during a game, the narrator would announce: "It is the witching hour – all curses are half price!" Come 1am, the game took an interest in the player's bedtime, announcing that "even keepers need to sleep." As night wore on, the voice would become increasingly impatient and weary. Amoral need not mean irresponsible, it seems.











Imps (top) do the hard work while wizards (above left) research and cast spells. Campaign mode (above) involves the destruction of a string of heroes as the keeper approaches the ultimate goal: the surface world













The underground environments in *DK2* offer a variety of terrains, including diggable earth, solid rock, and caverns flooded with water and lava

defences like doors to the all-time classic: a rolling Indiana Jones-style boulder that can crush everything in its path. In between are all kinds of dangling skeletons and the always useful poison-gas vents.

Many happy hours can be spent ringing your lair with fiendish killing-chambers, hidden triggers and secret passages. Softened up by the traps, surviving heroes can be set upon by your creatures and beaten to within an inch of their life. Enemies are mostly just stunned if they lose a fight – and while thus poleaxed, they can be dragged to a prison. There, they will either starve and rise as a skeleton to join your armies, or they can be dropped in a torture chamber where they'll be tormented by whip-wielding dominatrices called Mistresses (a saucy element the game revels in) and become allies.

Your own creatures can, when stunned, be dragged back to the lair to recover. If the imps are too late and the creatures die, they can be dragged to a graveyard and buried, later to rise as vampires. It could have been called *Theme Necropolis*.

If the creatures die, they can be dragged to a graveyard and buried, later to rise as vampires. It could have been called Theme Necropolis

The original, Peter Molyneux-designed, *Dungeon Keeper* had a similarly detailed internal ecology and other charms but doesn't often come out of its box nowadays, while *DK2* continues to be a treat. It's rare that a sequel can lose a talent like Molyneux and still exceed its ancestor, but Bullfrog's Colin Robinson managed it. *DK2* is a vast graphical advance on the original, substituting its sprites for fully 3D creatures and introducing a depth and richness to the interiors that is truly atmospheric.

The player interacts with this gorgeous environment via a disembodied hand – a feature carried over from the original and one which Bullfrog was to re-use in 2001's *Black & White*. The hand allows a much deeper tactile involvement in the game environment than a simple cursor. Not only can creatures and gold be picked up, but encouraging slaps can be dispensed – including to animals you initially think are just decorative, like the chickens in the hatchery and the rats in the prison.

DK2 is also far funnier than the original, with a jokey narration by Richard Ridings (see 'Snooze alarm') and a seemingly inexhaustible supply of in-game jokes and Easter eggs. Humour was one strand of *Dungeon Keeper*, but it's at the malevolent heart of *DK2*. That might be its real advantage over the its predecessor: Molyneux's original game was part of his career-long interest in bending and manipulating morality within games, from *Populous* (1989) to *Fable* (2005). *Black & White*, which made choosing between good and evil the central dilemma of an RTS game, could be considered the lost sequel to *DK2*. But what makes *DK2* really refreshing is that it's less self-conscious about its immorality than its predecessor – it's just raucous good fun.

So what's the point? There must be more to life than lounging around in a luxurious underground fortress-casino surrounded by servants, treasure and leather-clad lovelies. Well, maybe. In the simple skirmish and multiplayer games, there are other keepers advancing towards you, and they must be defeated. But in the campaign game, it's the forces of humanity, moral rectitude, motherhood and apple pie that are trying to put a stop to your subterranean shenanigans. Those roving bands of heroes must be defended against while you bide your time and build up forces strong enough to pursue them back to their source and kill their lord, so the Horned Demon can show up and claim that level's 'portal gem'. The keeper advances from land to land, undermining them and doing battle with their resident heroes to collect these gems.

As each land is corrupted from beneath, it turns brown and withered on the campaign map – your progress is an advancing stain. All of this serves the ultimate aim of a final confrontation, which sees the keeper burst forth on to the surface of an unsuspecting world…

Something which never happens. Strangely, much of *DK2* is just a setup for a sequel, *Dungeon Keeper 3*, trailed within the game but cancelled early in 2000. Unless the franchise unexpectedly rises from its grave, the keeper is condemned to toil within the bowels of the earth forever. It could be something from Milton or Dante.

All that digging and undermining, only to find that you've just been getting deeper and deeper into the pit; perhaps a fitting fate for an evil overlord. But it's a lot more fun than Inferno. Maybe it's more the song that plays in the casino when the jackpot is hit: Disco Inferno.



SEE IT MY WAY

'Possession' is perhaps the most important spell in the keeper's armoury. It allows the player to indulge in a bit of hands-on management, taking control of a creature and exploring the underground maze as an inhabitant, rather than gazing down from above.

This meant the keeper could perform detailed tasks that individual creatures are too stupid to manage, like destroying a particular obstacle. Alternatively, it could just be used to sight-see and wander around the caverns and chambers of the dungeon, enjoying the flickering torchlight and perhaps killing the odd enemy first-hand. It amounts to a playable and enjoyable firstperson slash 'em up distraction within the game.





Dungeon interiors are genuinely atmospheric thanks to *DK2*'s graphical advances, from dark, eerie tunnels to the warmth and light of the Dungeon Heart (above)



THE MAKING OF…

BARBARIAN: THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR

How swords, sandals and a Page 3 girl turned a low-profile British publisher into a tabloid target

FORMAT: **VARIOUS** PUBLISHER: **PALACE SOFTWARE/EPYX** DEVELOPER: **PALACE SOFTWARE** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE: **1987**



If you were a teenage boy in 1987, there were at least two reasons why you'd probably remember Palace Software's *Barbarian*. And they both belonged to Page 3 girl Maria Whittaker. A victim of its own brilliantly conceived exploitation marketing campaign, which featured the busty glamour model posed beneath a long-haired muscle-man wielding an enormous sword, the game became mired in controversy when it hit shelves.

"It was an incredible shitstorm," laughs the game's producer, **Richard Leinfellner.** "But it was totally deliberate on our part. Back in those days it was hard to get the word out about a new game. With *Cauldron*, our earlier title, we realised people had to play the game in order to want the game. With *Barbarian* we tried to be really edgy and get people talking about it even before they'd played it."

While everyone remembers the controversy, what's often forgotten is that behind all the tabloid hysteria lay a videogame that's memorable in its own right. "That's what a lot of people miss," says designer and artist **Steve Brown**, who dreamt up the game and its tabloid-baiting PR campaign. "The publicity was really just the icing on the cake."

Kicking the fighting game back to the iron age, *Barbarian* certainly stood out from the crowd. While most other one-on-one titles from *Yie Ar Kung Fu* to *IK+* were obsessed with eastern martial arts, Palace Software's quick-paced, gory offering invigorated the genre with ultra-violence, a distinctive fantasy motif and incredibly detailed character animations.

Nestled among the sex shops and tattoo parlours of King's Cross in London, the Scala was Britain's most notorious cinema. Fondly nicknamed 'The Sodom Odeon', it was renowned as a venue where trash horror, martial arts movies and gay skin flicks rubbed shoulders with arthouse classics by Bergman and Fellini. In the early '80s it became a focal point for the hysteria surrounding 'video nasties' when film distributor Palace Pictures used it as the venue for the first UK showing of The Evil Dead.

In 1985, it was also home to Palace Software. Installed in a room behind the projection booth, the company's game division started out with an unmemorable C64 adaptation of The Evil Dead – and survived a police raid on the premises looking for the movie's master

BACK TO DRAX

Released in 1988, *Barbarian II: The Dungeon Of Drax* tried something more adventurous – retooling the original's combat for a maze quest. Guiding either a male or female warrior through wasteland, caves and dungeons, you're charged with chasing down Drax. It didn't quite gel and the finished product remains a love-hate affair for the Palace team. "I have mixed feelings about it," admits Brown. "The simplicity of the first one was lost." Leinfellner agrees: "It was a classic case of feature creep and too many cooks," he complains. Proof that bigger isn't always better, even for barbarians.



The six dots at the top of the screen represent a barbarian's life – you can win by removing all of your opponent's health, or by pulling off a decapitation move to bring about an instant kill

copy. Then it expanded into more original territory with *Cauldron* and *Cauldron II: The Pumpkin Strikes Back*. Commercial success on those titles gave the firm considerable freedom for its third property.

"I'd always been a fan of Conan the Barbarian," says Brown, "and when I was growing up my hero was Frank Frazetta, who painted these real in-your-face oil paintings of guys with swords leaping about surrounded by busty princesses." These influences became the key drivers behind *Barbarian*.

"None of the German lawyers could do the decapitation move in court, so the judge couldn't see what all the fuss was about"

"Before Steve joined he'd never played a computer game in his life," recalls Leinfellner, Palace Software's co-founder. "He came from a fine arts background. One of the advantages of hiring someone from outside the business is that they're not bound by convention. So when he started designing *Barbarian* on the Commodore 64, he came in and said: 'I don't want these little sprites, I want *huge* sprites!' We told him that they had to be 16x16 or 24x21 but he wasn't having any of it: 'I want them to be 128 tall and God knows how wide.'"

After much deliberation at the Malt & Hops, their local pub, Leinfellner and coder Stanley Schembri cracked it. "We realised that if we multiplexed the sprites and had different look-up tables for different frames, we could make it work," Leinfellner recalls, while also noting the inspirational qualities of beer: "At one point we suggested simply transferring our salaries straight to the bar and cutting out the middle man."

The Malt & Hops wasn't the only venue for brainstorming, according to Brown. High up on the roof of the crumbling art deco cinema itself, the team would often "munch sandwiches and occasionally drop things on to unsuspecting passers by" during their lunch breaks. During one such session, the designer realised how to make the warriors' animation stand out.

"I really wanted the fighting to look fluid," Brown explains. "So we decided to practise attacking and parrying moves with wooden swords. We leapt about in the office against a blank wall and videotaped it. It was me and Gary Carr [who'd graduate to Lionhead Studios]. We'd sometimes take out the light fittings with these pretty big swords!"

Fortunately, the damage paid for itself. Videotaped footage helped give the onscreen, bare-chested warriors a stunning roster of animations as they rolled, kicked and headbutted one another. Meanwhile, a slew of special moves gave the game instant cult appeal and served to highlight the glorious responsiveness of the controls – qualities that shone particularly brightly in twoplayer mode.

Chief among the game's signature moves was the now-infamous 'web of death', a whirling-dervish display of swordsmanship that was more showy than effective ("I, er, *homaged* that from the movie Conan The Destroyer," admits Brown faux-sheepishly). Then there was a spinning strike called the flying neck chop that, if timed correctly, would lop an opponent's head from their shoulders with a gush of red pixels. The offending cranium would then bounce along the screen, kicked by the laughing green imp who arrived to drag off each corpse. "We based the goblin on Stanley Schembri," says Lienfellner. "It had Stan's cackle."

Although the backgrounds could be rather cheerless – spanning forests, a combat pit and Drax's throne room as players fought the game's eight opponents – *Barbarian* made up for it with memorable polish: the ornamental snakes bordering the screen would spring to life and hiss as health bars were depleted; and late composer Richard Joseph added a menacing score and meaty sound effects of swords clanging against swords. It was a game in which every headbutt and every decapitation oozed love and care. "I shouldn't really call it *beautiful* violence," says Brown, "but just as the Matrix movies made an artform out of stylising martial arts, we were trying to put that kind of quality into the fighting animations."





Palace knew that it had a hit on its hands. "I remember the first time we showed it to [Zzap! editor] Gary Penn," says Leinfellner. "I thought he was going to piss himself laughing. He was just in stitches at the little guy's cackle. We knew we'd nailed it then. We absolutely knew it."

But it was the publicity campaign featuring Page 3 girl Maria Whittaker that sealed the deal. The photo shoot for the game's cover art and free promo poster was Brown's attempt to recreate one of his beloved Frank Frazetta portraits with real people. "Maria was a sweetie, although she was a bit iffy at first. I showed her a picture of a princess who had a snake draped over her – and who herself was draped over a big, sweaty man. She was like: 'Oo-er, I dunno about this!' But we persuaded her."

Whittaker posed in a blue bikini – considerably more than she often wore while modelling – and sat at the feet of the eponymous barbarian, played by actor Michael Van Wijk, who'd later find fame as Wolf in TV show Gladiators. "He was such a pussycat of a man," Brown says. "I had to tell him to scowl and look fierce. The two *Barbarian* shoots got him the Gladiators gig and he used the same persona on the show. Funny – he's never sent me a royalty cheque!"

The ad campaign sparked a great deal of debate. Feminists complained it objectified women, Mary Whitehouse seethed, and Boots refused to stock the game until Palace toned down the art.

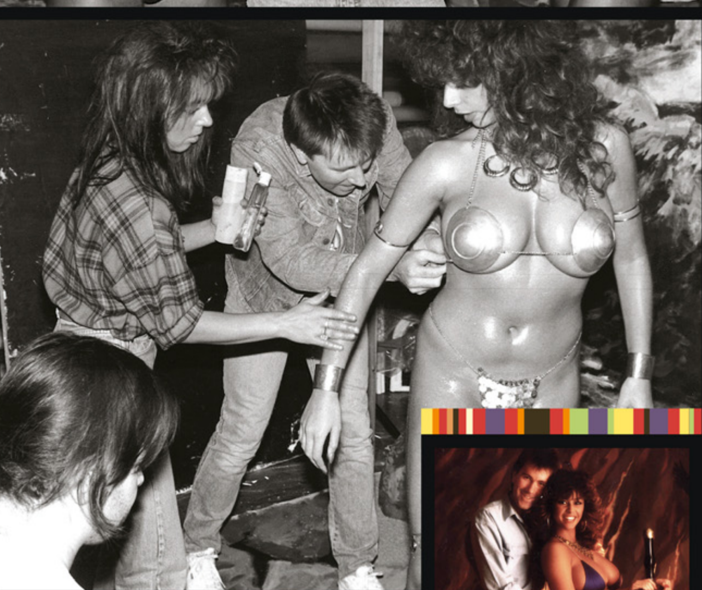
But it wasn't just the models that caused problems. The violence was also an issue, especially in Germany, where Palace was dragged through the law courts. "It got banned, then we got the ban reversed," explains Leinfellner. "None of the German lawyers could play the game well enough to do the super slash decapitation move in court, so the judge couldn't see what all the fuss was about. A few weeks later they hired some young kid to play the game in court and then we got banned properly." The game was later released in Germany with its onscreen blood changed from red to green – a fate that awaited many other violently themed games in the future.

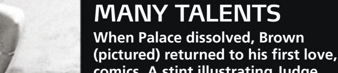
Despite such problems, *Barbarian* was a huge success. "My first royalty cheque was for something like £20,000, about double my salary," remembers Leinfellner, "and I kept getting royalty cheques for about seven years." It spawned a sequel, *Barbarian II: The Dungeon Of Drax* (see 'Back To Drax'), accompanied by similarly bold marketing, which nevertheless could not disguise the diminishing returns.

"I think at that point we were starting to reach the edge of what Britsoft could do," says Leinfellner, who eventually swapped Palace for Mindscape, followed by EA, and is currently CEO of outsourcing company Babel Media. "By that point the American software was a lot better, quite frankly. Britsoft really was more like the demo scene with a bit of commercial edge to it. The Americans wrote big games very well. We were trying to play in the big league and most weren't really up to it."

Palace Software's messy collapse left confusion over who owned the rights to what, which is probably why the otherwise inevitable modern-day reissue of *Barbarian* hasn't yet materialised. "You know," says Brown with a sudden seriousness, "maybe it's something we should look into…"







MANY TALENTS

When Palace dissolved, Brown (pictured) returned to his first love, comics. A stint illustrating Judge Dredd stories for 2000AD in the early '90s led to the global release of a self-published comic inspired by his *Cauldron* witch design. "Yep, my own company, my own characters. Tolkien meets The Terminator was my tagline. Rather good, I thought." He later returned to games, working at EA and then at 3, designing its in-house mobile titles. Today he enjoys thrashing the hell out of his beloved Fender Stratocaster in his band Deeply Purple, writing, painting and bronze sculpture. "Female nudes, of course," he laughs. Business as usual, then.

Behind the scenes at a *Barbarian II* photo session, these shots show the care and effort Steve Brown put into making comfortable a costume made of chains and metal ashtrays



Codeshop

Tracking developments in development



Building blocks

Optimising an MMORPG engine is hard work, and making one that's user-proof requires seriously creative thinking





Erik Urdang, technical director

For *Lego Universe*, developer NetDevil needed solid foundations for its MMOG, and what better, or simpler, than the famous rectangles we all know and love? Simple object, simple task, right? "Not so fast," says technical director **Erik Urdang**. "If you want them to look like real Lego bricks – and we do – you need to make them very carefully. The top of a single stud, the round things on top, if you're standing close to it in the game – meaning that we need to use the highest resolution – is represented as a dodecagon made up of 12 equilateral triangles. The 12 sides of the cylinder are divided into two more triangles each, for a grand total of 36 triangles. For one stud on one brick!"

In a game with a heavy emphasis on UGC, that sounds like a molehill that could reach mountain status very quickly. Urdang: "We're talking about potentially needing hundreds of polygons to represent just one brick! And the more polygons you ask the computer to draw, the more work it has to do and the slower it goes." Fortunately for Urdang's team, there's a solution for every problem. The brick's nature has presented the ultimate get-out clause for enabling user creations to scale great heights by cleverly hiding the pixel-swallowing detail of the studs: "What if a player, or game developer for that matter, wants to build a model using hundreds of bricks?" Urdang asks. "Sounds hopeless. But here's the important observation: if you snap two bricks together, you have now rendered at least some of the



"We're talking about potentially needing hundreds of polygons to represent just one brick!"

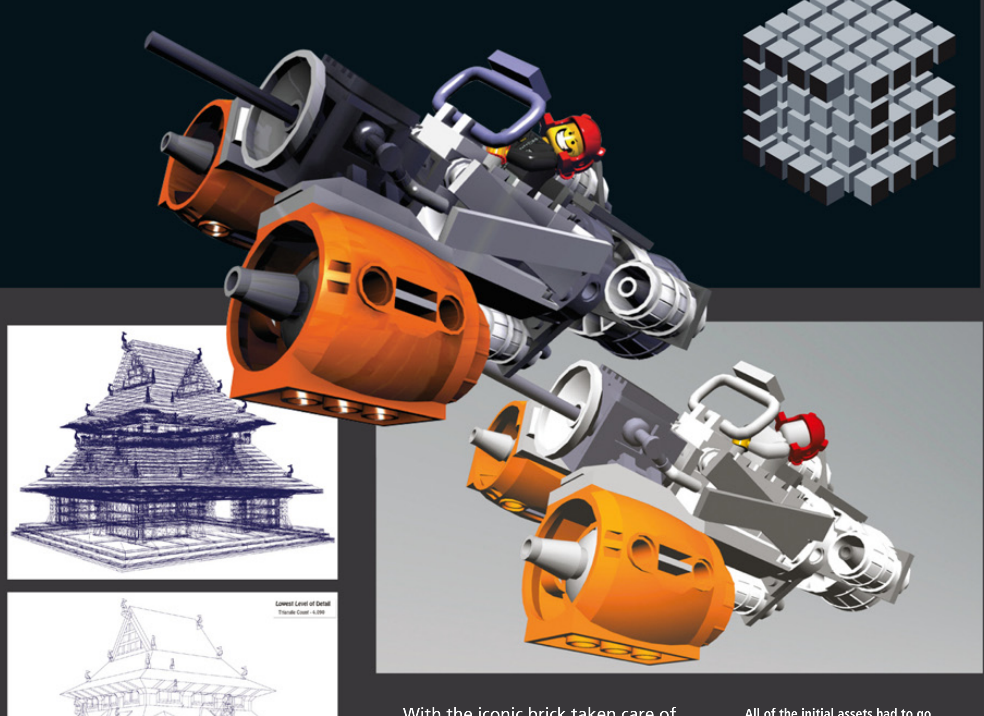






The world of *Lego Universe* is epic in scale as well as high in both detail and charm. The most intricate and challenging work has gone into the creation of assets, from creatures like pets to giant end-of-level bosses, such as this purple dragon (above)





geometry invisible – the parts that are connected to each other, that is. If we can figure out which polygons can be removed, we can allow much larger models in the game."

This is where it gets tricky, requiring the introduction of specialist hardware. Using Monte Carlo ray casting, the team has been able to overcome the hurdle posed to the proprietary game engine. Urdang: "Here's how it works: shoot a large number of rays from random angles into a model and see which surfaces they hit. The rays represent what a user could potentially see. If a ray hits a triangle in the model, you assume it is visible and keep it in the final result. In the end, any triangle that isn't hit – if you tried enough random rays – can safely be removed." It's a method that's been employed throughout game history, and its application here is extensive. "We're using special-purpose hardware, running a customised algorithm on a GPU to carry out this process for each of the potentially millions of models we expect our users to build," Urdang explains.



Following the optimisation process, the game's models undergo a colour variation phase, which subtlety changes individual Lego brick shades to make them appear more realistic. The final pass is the ambient occlusion phase

With the iconic brick taken care of structurally, we move on to the fact that Lego is one of the most colourful playthings in any child's toybox. The range of hues and the depth of shading for each brick is another careful consideration for the NetDevil team.

"Depending on how you do this, it can also be very computationally expensive," says Urdang. "In fact, it's just too expensive to do this [colouring and shading] at run-time. So what we developed here is a proprietary process by which we perform an ambient occlusion pass on the model and then 'bake' it in. The idea of ambient occlusion is obviously to simulate how light falls on – and is reflected by – a particular shape. If you look at one of the corners of the room you're sitting in, it's probably a bit darker than the middle of one of the walls, and if you represent that kind of information into a mesh representing a Lego model, it gives it a much more vibrant and realistic feeling."

After a demonstration of early trials with different approaches – and vastly differing framerates – it's clear that much experimentation has led the team to this technical sweet spot, balancing believable visuals with optimal performance – precisely what it needs with a well-known brand aimed at a wide audience.

All of the initial assets had to go through an approval process with the Lego corporation. User-generated content will also be subject to close scrutiny, with teams working around the clock to ensure that the game's predominantly young playerbase is protected from anything offensive



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Outso Ltd

DATE FOUNDED: 2005

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 50

KEY STAFF: Halli Bjornsson (CEO), Justin Johnson (CTO), Joel Kemp (COO), Steve Riding, (studio manager)



URL: www.outso.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:
Resistance Home Space, *Uncharted 2* Home Space, *Assassin's Creed* Home Space, *Sodium One*



As well as creating PlayStation Home Spaces for games such as *Assassin's Creed* and *Uncharted 2*, Outso continues to expand *Sodium One* (above)





LOCATION:
Nottingham, UK

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Expansion of the *Sodium One* universe in PS Home, plus several large projects with key IP holders, and a major new as-yet-unannounced IP

ABOUT THE STUDIO:

"Founded in 2005, Outso has grown from three company directors to a team of 50. Initially an outsourcing business, Outso is now the leading developer of content for PlayStation Home. Outso has created a number of core spaces for Europe and America, including the *Infamous*, *Resistance: Fall Of Man*, *Uncharted 2* and *Assassin's Creed* spaces. In 2009, Outso launched Lockwood Publishing, dedicated to releasing high-quality virtual items to sell in Home's stores. In this same year Outso launched *Sodium One*, Home's first original IP, providing a unique environment for users to meet and play. Outso was the innovator behind various Home firsts, including leaderboards, animated furniture and clothing, and the inclusion of user-generated content in Home spaces.

"Current projects include an exciting collaboration with a leading studio alongside development of a new IP and additions to the world of *Sodium*.

"Central to Outso's work is the aim of connecting the world through rich social online experiences. Outso's philosophy of 'Total Development' involves employing multi-skilled individuals capable of taking on various roles across different projects simultaneously. Every team member is given responsibility and allowed freedom to work autonomously as part of the numerous small teams within the company."







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BY CLINT HOCKING

SOMETHING FROM (CLICK) NOTHING Convergence culture

Part five: Gaming across the fifth dimension

Revolutionary ideas in science, technology and philosophy don't exist in isolation in academic institutes, government think tanks or corporate R&D labs, they touch all aspects of our culture. The ideas of Copernicus, Galileo and Darwin undercut millennia of oppression, giving rise to concepts like literacy, democracy and equality. Relativity went hand in hand with the dismantling of objectivity in art and literature. Today, as scientists unravel the many-worlds interpretation and similar theories, we see a simultaneous blurring of the boundaries between the online universe and the physical universe. Our sense of the immediate here and now is altered by the layer of the internet, its systems, data, and users. This new sense of reality is reflected in our art – and our games.

Who is 'there' when we play *Left 4 Dead*? Am I hosting the server? Is he? Did it migrate? Is he there or is that a bot? Has he joined another game? Am I alone? What does 'alone' even mean where worlds overlap and relocate, and characters' bodies are intermittently inhabited or automated? We don't think twice about these things when we play *L4D*, but the hyperdimensional structure of the game reflects a culture that similarly doesn't give a second thought to navigating with stitched-together photographs taken in different months or years to rendezvous with friends geotagging their tweets only to find out they have already left – leaving us in the physical company of one set of friends and the psychological company of someone absent. Even if *L4D*'s feature set had been technologically possible in 2000, no one would have accepted it. Today, we take it for granted.





> I'd rather have a dozen friends playing Mass Effect 3, and be able to click on their tweets to populate my crew with their characters

Fifteen years ago it was interesting to set up a LAN in a room full of PCs so we could play co-op *Rainbow Six*. Today, popup notifications that friends have come online, or joined your game are not just normal, they are banal. The New Interesting is not having to grind for 12 hours to be able to safely play *Crackdown* in co-op. We were too long handcuffed by a wrongheaded desire to protect the coherence of the fiction of our game worlds, and this made allowing players to play co-op games difficult. But our shifting cultural perceptions have loosened those bonds. The story of *Crackdown* doesn't break if my friend helps me level up, and we don't need to explain it with some kind of complicated and fictionally justified sidekick system. If the system you contrive to protect your fiction is so complicated that it stops people from playing, you're doing it wrong.

Demon's Souls gives us a fantasy realm in which the boundaries between the worlds of the living and the damned overlap strangely. I see the apparitions of other players fighting enemies I haven't yet encountered. I witness the ghosts of their demise like footprints in interdimensional snow. In *System Shock 2*, these apparitions needed to be explained as neurological side-effects of the upgrade system. In *Demon's Souls*, we need no such explanation – not because it makes better sense, but simply because we 'get' the idea of overlapping universes and are willing to explore those ideas in our art.

Captain Forever runs in your browser. Conveniently, so does Twitter. *Captain Forever* saves your entire game history on a server and allows other people to launch a new game using your ship at any point in its history simply by clicking on a tweet. "That's not fair," we cried in 1999, "players should have to earn that ship." Bullshit.

In order to make the grade as a Captain, Commander Shepard has some things to learn, I think. I'd way rather have a dozen friends playing *Mass Effect 3*, all playing different characters, and be able to click on their tweets to populate my crew with their levelled-up characters and all the relationship history that was developed by them over time, than have cleverly authored characters filling out my roster in a branching narrative.

Mass Effect story die-hards and fanboys will, of course, disagree. Probably so will EA and BioWare. And people will continue to wonder why gaming has such a hard time climbing out of the cultural ghetto inhabited by schlock sci-fi and superhero comics. The answer is simply that, until we make more games that address the current human experience using the central voice of the medium, we belong in that ghetto.

Most big games today use story and character to explore themes we have explored before in other media that – simply put – use story and character to better effect. *Demon's Souls*, *Left 4 Dead* and *Captain Forever* all explore the way we experience and perceive our world as individuals and collectively through our culture. And they do so using the uniquely meaningful properties of interactive games.

These are games that have something to say that can't be said in other media.

These are the games that are pushing human culture forward.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com



Illustration: Martin Davies

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

BY RANDY SMITH

In search of meaning

The difference between pornography and erotica is how much it's pure stimulation and diversion versus how much the baser appeals have to make room for some higher purpose. Also, if it's black-and-white, it's erotica.

Looking back on my last column I can see how I came off as, perhaps, critical of *Alan Wake*, describing it as, well, historically irrelevant. Feeling nervous about that led me to wonder what's so great about my latest project. In fairness, Tiger Style pursues some noble ambitions: innovative mechanics, non-violent action gameplay and advanced concepts in interactivity brought to a casual audience. You can maybe drum up a little historical relevance that way, but really what drives us is meaning, that our games might provide more than stimulation and a way to pass hours. Someday, when interactive art has evolved as far as film, the emphasis will be on the themes and messages you're able to convey, less so features and technology. But how do you know whether you're making a meaningful work?

Meaning is elusive, hard to quantify and track, which gives it a slippery relationship with scheduling and production, which in turn makes it vulnerable in profit-driven environments like most big studios, to some degree understandably. We're way behind on this new project, which we've already been working on for as long as it took us to make the entirety of *Spider* but which probably has another six months to go. My inner producer says: "Build those levels! There's nothing stopping you. Plenty of gameplay already exists. What do you want this section of cave to look like? What objects does the player encounter? Throw in some lava, stalactites, and floating platforms! Go!"

But I can't. I try, but I have an overpowering instinct that insists it would be doing things out of order. Sure, we could make it fun and look cool. But I don't know enough about why caves have different appearances. This game is set on Mars. Could stalactites even form there? What impact would low gravity and freezing temperatures have? Is there no running water on Mars, or just none that has been confirmed yet? Or bigger issues: what is the structure of this place the player has discovered, and how will they encounter it, given that they are proceeding from the outside in? How will that feel; will it convey the right tone? What is its history and purpose? Instead of building levels, I am drawing diagrams and timelines no one will ever see, spending days on research and consulting with scientists.

> "We're way behind on this new project. My inner producer says: "Build those levels! There's nothing stopping you." But I can't"

This is a familiar wrestling match. On *Spider*, I spent weeks of production charting out the timeline of the family's interwoven stories. I liked the visual of a half-burned stack of letters behind the furnace, and it made a rewarding secret for the player to discover. But who wrote those letters, and how did they wind up there? Were they burned by a jealous lover or someone covering their tracks? Some of that information was never even intended to surface in the game, much like we aren't currently making a game where we expect players to be familiar with the geological history of Mars. *Spider*'s story was intended to be open for interpretation, but we needed at least one consistent explanation that included everything, a single version that held together perfectly, or else it would be a betrayal of the player. When players try to get things to add up and they don't, I wanted them to be able to trust that they must have missed something or misinterpreted a clue.

Consistency is just one of the ingredients that helps create meaning. In my experience, two others are equally associated with research: passion and authenticity. When you're deeply interested in a topic you understand intimately, you're more likely to produce art in the process of conveying the importance it holds for you. And for a sci-fi game that hopes to be taken at all seriously, credibility is crucial, too. We already knew enough about houses and ladybugs to shoot from the hip while making *Spider*, but we know a lot less about whether a raging Martian sandstorm could even knock you down, given how tiny the atmospheric pressure is there. I don't have the recipe for meaning, but I'm sure it helps to heap in ingredients during these formative, structural stages, before you start building levels you hope might ship.

Of course you can take it too far. Perfectionism can prevent you from ever building anything. But if you're stalling only out of the urge to get it right, something amazing happens once those top-level goals snap into focus: they assert themselves downward, surfacing naturally in the low-level work as details and texture. The levels seem to design themselves, each driven to cohere around a known contribution to the overall. You don't wonder what this level could be, you know what it must be to play its role in the higher purpose, what it must look like, how it must feel, and what information it hopes to convey. Then you can start building.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch



Illustration: Martin Davies

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

The consciousness of pebbles

BY STEVEN POOLE

I was walking to the supermarket, minding my own business and listening to Slash, when in the silence between tracks I overheard the following exchange between two little girls:

"She's a princess pirate."

"A princess pirate? There's no such thing!"

"You know, a pirate princess."

"Oh! There is!"

It was cute, I thought, as the top-hatted Les Paul-botherer strutted once more down my ear canals, but it also illustrated perfectly the fact that we demand a certain sort of logic even in fantasy (as far as I know, the predatory ships prowling off the coast of Somalia are not staffed by actual royals), and these children – no more than six or seven, by the sound of it – were already in the habit of debating possible and impossible ontologies of entirely made-up worlds.

> Some of the greatest British or American games build architecturally awe-inspiring vistas that are totally inert

One way in which a world may be magical, yet still obliged to obey certain criteria of coherence, is if objects are alive. The animism of the Japanese Shinto religion, according to which natural objects such as trees and mountains are inhabited by spirits (so many, indeed, that there are 'eight million gods'), finds an elaboration in many videogames – most obviously, of course, the *Zelda*s and *Mario*s, where virtually nothing is a 'dead' object but will harbour the potential for transformation, or a communicating mind, friendly or otherwise.

An animistic game is not entitled, however, to do anything it wants. If an electric kettle were to transform into a werewolf, a six-year-old girl would rightly protest: "A werewolf kettle? There's no such thing!" In the Mushroom Kingdom, by contrast, everything makes sense: transformations and uses of objects or animals may be unpredictable, but retrospectively slot perfectly into a logical matrix of changes. (Of course a wooden barrel is shattered by a spiky iron ball; of course jumping on a turtle's head makes him retreat into his shell.)

And so playing *New Super Mario Bros Wii* with a friend is a delightful experience, as tricky parts prompt the temporary cessation of bitchy hostilities (it's all too amusingly easy to kill your co-op partner, deliberately or otherwise) in favour of strategic discussions couched in terms of "What if?" or "Maybe we can…" Can you jump on a bomb that walks around on its little legs in order to light its fuse and then quickly pick it up and throw it before it explodes? Of course you can. This is what we would expect from bombs with legs, even though such things don't exist in real life – though it can only be a matter of time before Nintendo is prosecuted for providing inspiration to terrorists. If one of the virtues of videogames is the pleasure of experimentation and discovery, moreover, then an animistic world has the advantage that there is simply more stuff worth experimenting with.

This is an important general difference between Japanese and western games: in the former, the assumption is that everything you see might be alive; in the latter, the rule is more generally that everything is just decor, unless an action-button prompt appears when you hobble up to it on your avatar's bandy legs. Some of the greatest British or American games build architecturally awe-inspiring vistas that are totally inert, the rats or shadow-beings that flit around them appearing to belong to a completely different order of existence. By contrast, one of the joys of Miyamoto's games (among others) is that the distinction between environment and character is never quite so clear-cut or easy to second-guess. This is not merely a philosophical difference but one that leads to greater density of play potential.

One might be tempted to think that animism, while providing a rich seam for videogames, is merely a cultural hangover of ancient superstition, yet it has an intriguing and respectable analogue in modern western philosophy. This position, known as panpsychism, holds that all matter is imbued with consciousness, to varying degrees. Thus, the matter that comprises the human brain has a lot of consciousness, but the matter that comprises a tree has some too, and even the matter that comprises a pebble has a tiny bit. This doctrine (lately espoused by the British philosopher Galen Strawson among others) is an audacious attempt to solve the old mind-body problem while granting the truth of scientific materialism. If consciousness is a property (to a greater or lesser extent) of all matter, then the puzzle doesn't look quite so insoluble, even if measuring the consciousness of a pebble seems rather hard to do.

Do you hear, at this moment, a small voice piping up: "There's no such think as a stone that thinks!" Perhaps; but perhaps not. Children are natural animists and panpsychists, and it's possible that their favourite videogames are so beloved not because they happen to be brightly coloured and cartoony, but because they provide confirmation of this worldview. PR-speak about artificial intelligence in games is all very well; what about pervasive intelligence?

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net


Illustration: **Martin Davies**

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Everyone's a critic

BY N'GAI CROAL

Pity the modern critic. The appetite and respect for authority that once existed now seem like relics in an age of Metacritics, Tomatometers, blogs, podcasts, walls, forums and Twitter. And some critics aren't taking their devaluation all that well.

Before the internet revolution, the masses could only express their opinion in a crude, binary fashion: by spending their time and/or money on a particular cultural product. A handful of people might get a letter to the editor published, or participate in a man-on-the-street interview. But for everyone else, conversations surrounding, say, movies, were either monologues (the critic speaks, everyone else reads/watches/listens) or small group dialogues.

The internet diminished the standing of critics in multiple ways. The local dominance of individual critics was taken away when people became free to access reviews from across the country and around the world. Aggregators reduced the influence of any given critic, as Metacritic explains on its About page: "Distill[ing] the opinions of the most respected critics writing online and in print to a single number"; now what matters is not any individual opinion, but the consensus. And the average person could now unleash his or her inner critic by putting up a site or blog, or posting comments – in many cases, right below the writings of professional critics.



It's the unintended consequences of parts two and three of this equation – the elevation of critical consensus over individual opinion and the democratising of critical expression – that have some critics increasingly concerned when it leads to attempts by commenters to transform consensus into orthodoxy and enforce it upon individual critics. As I write this, the most recent example has been the response to US television host Abbie Heppe's review of the Wii game *Metroid: Other M*, which prompted a firestorm over her giving it a score of 2/5 and calling out what she saw as a retrograde take on the game's heroine Samus Aran. This prompted blogger Michael Abbott to write the following, in a post titled 'Backlash': "I'm struck by this brouhaha, not because it's new or especially rancourous… But it does illustrate what happens when a writer for a high-profile outlet chooses to address a game critically – I mean when he or she functions as a critic instead of simply a reviewer. All too often the backlash is severe and ugly. It suggests that, for a sizable portion of the gaming audience, genuine criticism is perceived as inappropriate, unnecessary, or even unprofessional."

Of course, this is not just restricted to games. The strenuously iconoclastic film critic Armond White, whose regular and acidic departures from the critical consensus has made him infamous among a portion of online movie fans, described the situation thus in his essay 'Discourteous Discourse': "Consider how film criticism now works: Publicists select favourable media outlets to create advance buzz (embargoing others) and then, with frat-boy mentality in effect, no one else in cyberspace dares dissent from the hype… These new social networks overturn the informed judgments and occupational decorum of journalist-critics, substituting the glib enthusiasms and non-discriminating devotion of apparently juvenile cliques. Worse yet, this schoolyard style of peer group fanaticism has devolved into all-out, ugly intimidation: internet bullying."

White takes the worst of the internet to represent the whole. But journalist-critics are not and were never the only people capable of informed judgments and decorum. The intemperate and the ugly should be faced down, but no critic worth his or salt would be swayed by the mob, just as the objects of their derision should not mistake the mob for the majority.

In that regard, I prefer to focus on the best of the internet rather than the worst. It has enabled other thoughtful, considered and knowledgeable voices that would never previously have been heard to attract an audience to take game reviewing away from solely a consumer guide function and explore games from as varied a perspective as other media. Where professional reviewers have to be generalists, knowing a little bit about every genre, the internet makes it possible for critics to specialise in certain genres or franchises, and attract an audience looking for that kind of specificity. This should be celebrated, not dismissed along with the loud and the crude.

Some of this may be specific to the individual medium as well; in other words, I can see videogame criticism becoming even more reliant on what the internet makes possible than, say movies. If you take franchises like *Call Of Duty* and *Halo*, where far more time is spent playing multiplayer than campaign, how much does it make sense for reviews to devote even half of their available space to singleplayer?

We've still just scratched the surface of what the internet can do for criticism. And it's too important to leave to the mob.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com



Illustration: **Martin Davies**

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Issue 220

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forums.next-gen.biz

Topic: Guillermo del Toro on Videogames
"Videogames are the comic books of our time. It's a medium that gains no respect among the intelligentsia. They say "oh, videogames." And most people that complain about videogames have never f---ing played them."
Bugul

Awesome. High art filmmaker claims that games are art. End of. Sort of...
dynamite-ready

I'm always sceptical of movie directors making videogames. Talk is always of a grand, epic project, amazing narrative and emotive characters.
Listen to Miyamoto and his rhetoric is more like "we put this in because we thought it would be fun for the player".
Pabloamigo

***Zeno Clash* is about as close to a Del Toro game as you're gonna get, until his actual game comes out.**
Curtis

I read with great interest Mike Watson's letter from last month about the annoyance of save points and the possible incompatibility with how games are formatted and the demands of parenting. Well, Mike, speaking as a father of two, I have bad news for you because serious compromise is needed.

If anyone in game design is reading this, take note – most of the kids who grew up in the '80s and fell in love with games then are now parents. They still want to play games but they are now time-poor. Build games around this fact and you will sell them by the truckload. The Wii has its place for the kids but for my more mature gaming tastes too many games assume I either have 40 hours to invest in a storyline or I will have plenty of time during which I can play with no interruptions. Neither is realistic with small children.

Most of the kids who grew up in the '80s and fell in love with games then are now parents. They still want to play games but they are now time-poor

The main offender tends to be Japanese games which demand a lot of continual game time to get the most out of them – like saving progress. I ended up returning both *Devil May Cry 4* and *Final Fantasy XIII* because I was fed up playing the same bits over and over again as I was having to go off and be a dad and not able to save my progression in the game. Either that or my wife would return from dealing with some child-related crisis, finally have a chance to sit down and relax in front of the TV, and demand (not unreasonably) that I turn the 360 off NOW.

The best time to play is of course when the kids are asleep, in which case the volume must be low, and this means I have a natural disadvantage in multiplayer as people find it easier to sneak up behind me (can't hear them coming). However, the quick-hit nature of multiplayer is perfect for parenting, which is why I have spent more than eight days on *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*.

The average age of a gamer keeps going up, and this means the consumers' habits are changing too – all my friends play games and yet only one is not a parent. We all get a little jealous that he gets to play some cool games that we simply don't have the time or lifestyle to play. The irony is that every game designer interviewed claims the games market has matured but then they assume all gamers have the habits of teens sitting in their room glued to the screen for four hours straight. Oh, those were the days!
Jem Duducu


Letter of the month wins a DSi XL

Many disabled players have many different and varied disabilities, including missing limbs, colour blindness, deafness, partial sightedness, and so on. So how can videogames, and more importantly, developers, hope to please everybody, so that everybody can get to play that game they dearly want to? Well, obviously, they can't. But what they can do is please as many as possible as much as possible, and from a developer point of view it's not that hard. Here are four simple things which can be readily be implemented in games:

1. Customised/remappable controls. This is the single most important thing that can help a lot of physically impaired people. It used to be in almost every computer game, so why not now? It's not a big thing for developers, and it requires hardly any testing, so I fail to understand why it's not there.

2. Avoid using red and green colours together. Think of the hacking sequences in *BioShock*. Unplayable for a colour-blind person. And, since around a third of us males have some degree of colour-blindness, it's hardly a small issue. Again, not a great ask, developer-wise.

3. Subtitle everything! Hearing complications and deafness are often overlooked disabilities (since they're unseen). Obviously, this demands a bit more work from developers, but it makes one hell of a difference. Also, make sure it is noted *who* is speaking, and make sure ambient noise is also subtitled. Try to use white text on a black background, preferably windowed. Don't remove the text when the game is paused, and make sure it is readable from about five feet on a standard-def TV. To see how important this is, try playing a game like *Heavy Rain*, *Alan Wake* or most action/adventure games with the sound off and see how far you get without any audio cues.

4. Difficulty levels. This is a tricky one, and often a bone of contention. While there seems to be some snobbery



with some people about daring to admit to using the 'easy' mode, it needs to be there. Some disabilities involve lack of fine motor skills, so allowing the player a little more freedom in regard to reaction time, aiming, etc is a must. The ideal answer to this is a slider for the difficulty setting. To this day, this is my biggest issue with games. There can never be an example of a game being 'too easy' – while it may be too easy for you, it isn't for others. I still have found no good reason why this can't be a standard in gaming.

These things would turn a game from being totally unplayable to being playable for a vast majority of disabled gamers. Furthermore, a lot of these options would make life a whole lot easier for the able-bodied, too.

But, as with many things nowadays, it comes down to money. OK, well, consider that between 10–18% of the population have some form of disability (depending on whose statistics you read), and of those disabled people, a *lot* play games. That's quite a lot of potential income, especially when balanced against the minimal cost of implementing these options.

The final word is this. Some people are so disabled that they're stuck in bed or bound to a life where they're unable to do many things we take for granted. Those particular gamers can do everything within a game that they cannot in real life (ride horses, run businesses, get married, etc), so who are we to say they can't?

Daniel Linger

Do I press it? Do I wait? Oh, how these questions torment me as my finger hovers over the Start button! The dread that falls upon me as, in an instant, the cutscene before me cuts to black.

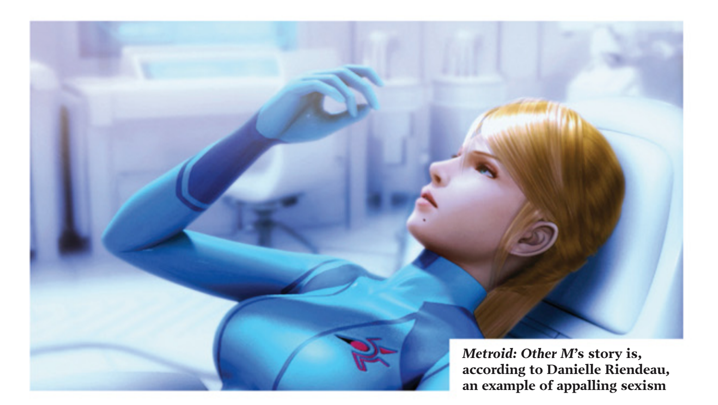
I look after my disabled mother full-time, and I'm pretty much on-call the entire day, so the ability to pause is an absolute must for me. Pausing during gameplay isn't a problem, but during a cutscene... It's a sad fact, but I have to schedule times to play select games that are heavy on cutscenes and storytelling for fear of missing something important if I'm called away.

Metal Gear Solid 4 comes to mind because it's one of the few games that upon hitting Start simply pauses the cutscene and offers two choices: 'Resume' and 'Skip'. Oh, how my life would be ever so more joyous if such was a standard feature!

Matthew Knight

Thank you to everyone who sent in letters on the topic of usability – we're going to be discussing the issues with developers soon. In the meantime, Matthew, the simple suspend function of your DSi XL should come in handy.

When my (female) Shepard mentioned wanting "marriage and blue children" with Liara (in the Shadow Broker DLC), I was nearly moved to tears



***Metroid: Other M*'s story is, according to Danielle Riendeau, an example of appalling sexism**



Topic: The Panasonic Jungle

A new handheld MMO-based system from Panasonic was unveiled last night. This just seems doomed to failure unless we all can't wait to get online and play *Battlestar Galactica* and *Farmville*. It might have a fighting chance if it could play the likes of *World Of Warcraft*, but that's looking unlikely.
Raiziel

It has quite a rugged design, so could be popular on building sites and the like.
JMW

Wow, that is... well, that's just astonishingly fugly.
Dan Dare

Might have a small chance of success in Korea, as they love their MMOs. Maybe China/Japan at a stretch? Over here? lol.
Djorn

Gizmondo mk II.
Skintboymike

This was my first thought also, even before I saw the device!

Company with questionable background in gaming releases awesum new hardware and y'know, mumble mumble games mumble, yay!

No.
b1ip

If you had to pick one major global manufacturer to actually make decent hardware it'd be Panasonic.

Other than that it seems a bizarre idea, but hey, plenty of bizarre ideas have been wild successes.
Mod74

Panasonic boardroom, 2010:

"Hey guys, we've finally done it. Remember our 3DO console in the '90s? And how it was almost a success but for an amazingly stupid price point? That was a close shave. We almost made some money there. Well, we've finally outdone it in the shitness stakes. How about... a console... with NO games? This should guarantee we lose a shedload of cash now..."
Ali

After reading the article on LGBT representation in issue 218, followed up by the review of *Metroid: Other M* in issue 219, I'd like to address a trend that I find troubling – a decline in the quality of the magazine's representation of women.

In the otherwise exceptionally well-written LGBT piece, there was perhaps one quote by a woman – which added precisely nothing to the discussion, making it appear as if the author simply needed a quick quote to make it seem as if there was female input. There are many women in the industry – working on development teams, in PR and on the journalism side – who could have offered valuable insight. As you included a voice from gaygamer.com, perhaps one of the founders of lesbiangamers.com could have been included.

Furthermore, the inclusion of a lesbian romance in the *Mass Effect* series was written off as something included only to titillate straight male players. As someone who's written professionally on LGBT media for several years, I'd like to object and say that the relationship portrayed between the two characters in question is one of the very best – and most heartfelt – lesbian romances in all of mainstream media. When my (female) Shepard mentioned wanting "marriage and blue children" with Liara (in the *Shadow Broker* DLC), I was nearly moved to tears. This is not the sort of thing developers put in a game for T-and-A shock value.

Later, in issue 219, the review of *Metroid: Other M* never mentioned the appalling sexism of the story – wherein Samus, the biggest badass bounty hunter in all the galaxy (a woman who eats giant space monsters for breakfast), is reduced to not using life-saving equipment because Adam (the older man she is in love with) hasn't 'authorised it' verbally. As many players – many of them male – had a real problem with this, I find it a bit troubling that the reviewer didn't even think to comment on it. Instead, he

Continued



or she wrote that the story is 'not bad', and chalks up the authorisation quirk as 'rubbish'.

I understand and appreciate that the vast majority of **Edge**'s audience is male. But certainly, it's also an audience that values diversity. I just hope that this will continue to be the case.
Danielle Riendeau

BioWare should be praised for a rare example of a developed lesbian relationship, but it was the absence of the male equivalent (in a game about choice) we found disappointing. And how do you reconcile the developer's subsequent insistence that Liara was monogendered and thus there was 'no female/female relationship' in *Mass Effect*? Samus is another matter entirely: as *Other M* showed, she's more engaging as an icon, and as an avatar, than a personality. Describing the Adam-authorised upgrade path as 'rubbish' was, we thought, pretty unambiguous – does it matter whether it's a male or female bounty hunter bound by it? In terms of *Other M*'s story, as clumsy as it is, it seems to us to be more about Adam as a fatherly figure than it is about a love affair with an older man. Did we miss a really important bit?

It's no secret that local splitscreen gaming is a dying concept. This decline is no doubt contributing to the overall deterioration of multiplayer in general, although some don't like to admit it.

It seems that with this HD boom, companies are simply too anal about the graphics of their games for them to be compromised to the effect that the quality is reduced fourfold in



Topic: Healthy gaming

There's a couple of news stories I've noticed today relating to the health impact of gaming.

In fairness, it's not quite the usual sensationalist rubbish we're all used to, but I still think it's a case of stating the obvious.

I'm sure loads of us have had bouts of addiction (anyone for *Civ*!?), and some are no doubt borderline addicts, but it's hardly crack; I've been just as addicted to 24 box sets as I have any game!

So who's got RSI from ignoring their game manuals' warnings to take a break every hour?
the daddy

I started suffering from terrible headaches while gaming, a few years ago. I went for an eye test and it turns out I was long sighted and was recommended I wear glasses.
optimark prime

Actually, my eyes have become proper boned of late. I reckon the iPhone hasn't helped.
the daddy

Not actually caused by gaming, but I broke a finger playing five-a-side, and tried a home-made splint to sort it out and avoid hospital queues. Which didn't work, so it had to be re-broken and held in place by pins. Now when I hold a DualShock pad for longer than 30 minutes it gets pretty painful, so I buy most of my multiformat games on 360.
Moot_Geeza



Laurie James cites *Serious Sam HD* as just one example of a modern FPS that fails to engage multiple players in the same room



incorporating four separate screen divisions. You'll find this mostly in console-exclusive games, as it is in the best interests of the firstparty companies for their console's graphical capabilities to be showcased in full, so splitscreen is usually dropped in favour of online or system-link play.

Now I don't know about you, but I believe there is no way to replace the magic of having a friend, relative or rival sat on your bed, competing or co-operating with you. No Bluetooth headset can provide the hilarity of your partner-in-game's involuntary facial expressions and bodily twitches as they tackle large challenges, and the commentary shared that leads to in-jokes brought up for weeks and even years to come. I still have many of my own, formulated in the golden age of Crash Bandicoot, Donkey Kong and *Mortal Kombat* that never would've come about were online multiplayer commonplace at the time. Even recently, I had a splitscreen 'no-scope' session on *Modern Warfare 2* (which is ironically one of the main franchises to blame for this), during which I laughed more than I had in a very long time. It is arguably because of the online success of games like *Call Of Duty* and *Halo* that lengthy story modes and splitscreen multiplayer have undergone such considerable decline, which is ironic, considering these games are two of the few modern franchises that still contain splitscreen. This is a real shame, as not all of my friends share my choice of console, so there is no way for us to play the majority of my games together, other than turn rotation (for shame, *Serious Sam HD*). I'm not saying I'm totally opposed to online play. Being one of the only decent players in my area, I'm often found playing *SSFIV* online with no issues whatsoever, aside from occasional lag.

I've also had a great time and made some good friends online on some games, including *Resident Evil 5* wherein my teammate had to leave for about 15 minutes, leaving me to cover his inactive Sheva because you can't pause online. That's the sort of situation where the magic of local multiplayer does carry over to online play.

My real issue is how people manage to find so much fun in being told by 11-year-old prepubescent shut-ins to 'rendezvous' with them so that we can carry out a successful 'flank' as though we were fighting in an actual war.
Laurie James

It's true that a tinny voice over a headset is no substitute for a friend in the same room, but consider how much it's done for distant friends who'd otherwise share no gaming time at all. Our experience with certain Move games recaptures some of the fun of playing together in the same room – albeit not yet with the longevity of, say, a *Mario Kart 64*. Give them a try.

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